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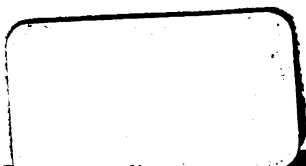
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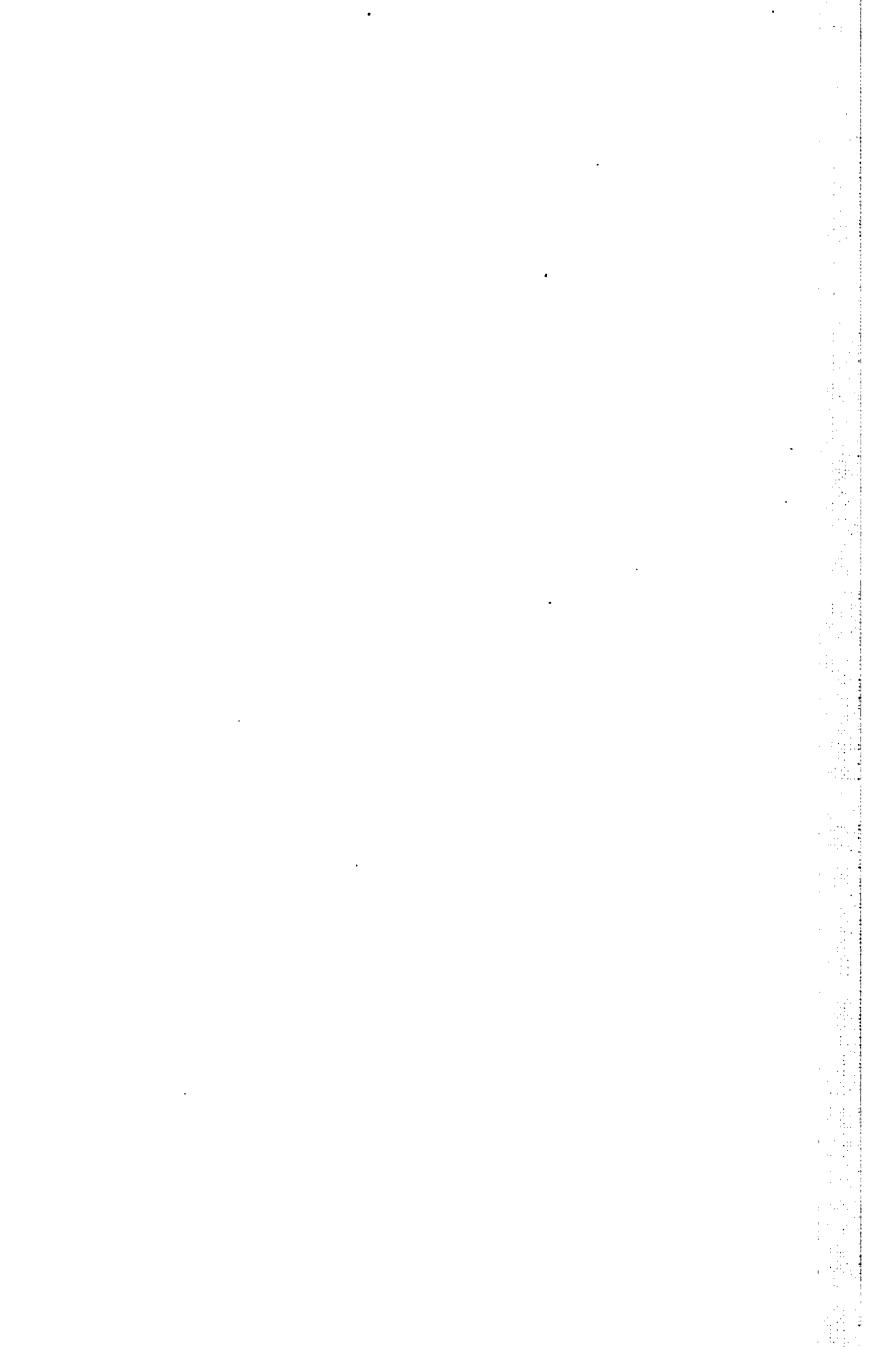


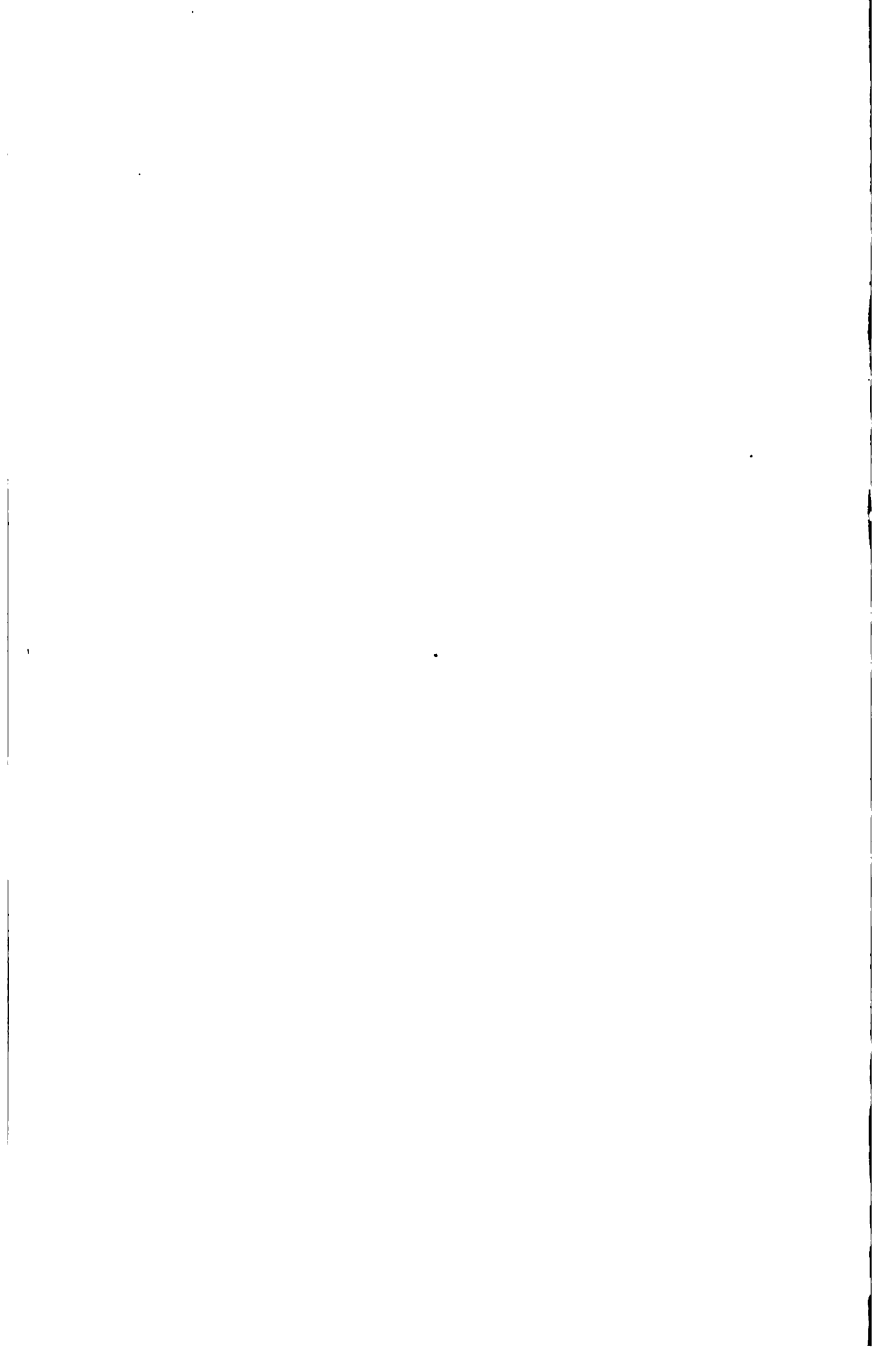
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**THE GREAT PEARL
SECRET**

W. H. ...

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C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON**

**A SOLDIER OF THE LEGION
EVERYMAN'S LAND
IT HAPPENED IN EGYPT
LADY BETTY ACROSS THE WATER
LORD LOVELAND DISCOVERS AMERICA
MY FRIEND THE CHAUFFEUR
PRINCESS VIRGINIA
ROSEMARY IN SEARCH OF A FATHER
SECRET HISTORY
SET IN SILVER
THE CAR OF DESTINY
THE CHAPERON
THE GOLDEN SILENCE
THE GREAT PEARL SECRET
THE GUESTS OF HERCULES
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THE PRINCESS PASSES
THE SECOND LATCHKEY**

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“He glared at the clasp as if the diamond and sapphire eye were a miniature head of Medusa”

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THE GREAT PEARL SECRET

BY
C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON



FRONTISPIECE
BY
JULIAN DE MISKEY

GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1921

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**THE GREAT PEARL
SECRET**



CHAPTER I

IN JULIET'S SITTING ROOM

A MAID opened the door leading from a bedroom to a salon of the "royal suite" at Harridge's Hotel. Dusk had fallen, and entering, she switched on the electricity. The room, with its almost Louis Sieze decorations, was suddenly flooded with light; and to her surprise the Frenchwoman saw a slim black figure nestled deep among cushions on a sofa before the fire. A small white face, with a frame of terra-cotta hair crushed under a mourning toque, turned a pair of big black eyes upon her.

"Miladi West!" exclaimed the maid. (She pronounced it "Vest") "Pardon, Madame, I did not know that any one was here."

She spoke in French, with an accent which told that her first language had been Italian, learned in the south of France; though in looks she was the *chic* Parisienne. Her English was quite good, but when she used that tongue, her accent was of New York. She preferred French, however, was proud of being French, and had Frenchified her Nicois-Italian name of Simonetta Amaranti to Simone Amaranthe. All Juliet Phayre's friends had to be polite to Simone.

"Mr. Phayre's man let me in," said the red-haired lady in widow's weeds. "After I'd had a look at the wedding presents, I was so dazzled that I switched off the lights." She laughed, and then cried, "Leave the lights now! I suppose Mademoiselle won't be forever?"

Simone shrugged her thin shoulders just perceptibly. "Mademoiselle sent me out on an errand, Miladi. I have not long returned, with the perfume she wanted. It was for the *coiffeur* who is here to wash the hair of Mademoiselle. She would not have the stuff he brought, so the man was obliged to wait. I am afraid the drying, even with the hot-air machine, will take some time. Miladi knows what a quantity of the hairs there are on the pretty head of Mademoiselle, and how she is exacting of the way everything is done!"

The red-haired lady guessed from the Frenchwoman's tone that Simone considered the introduction of a *coiffeur* a slight to her own skill. "Why, yes," she agreed. "Mademoiselle is exacting. But what would you? She is a spoiled child. The least crumple in a rose-leaf—by the way, Simone" (she stopped for a little throaty chuckle), "is it true about the *carpet* in this suite?"

"The carpet, Miladi?" Simone flushed faintly through her dark skin, and "Miladi" made a second guess. Of course Juliet trusted Simone, and depended upon her blindly; but she—Emmy West—

had often wondered how certain spicy little items concerning the Phayre family reached the gossip columns of "society papers."

"I read such an amusing paragraph in *Modern Ways* this morning," she explained. "It was *apropos* of the wedding, of course. *Modern Ways* loves a chance for a 'dig' at us Americans who marry well-known Englishmen! It said that when Miss Juliet Phayre and her Uncle Henry came over from Paris the other day, and took this royal suite which Mr. Phayre had engaged, Miss Phayre sent for the manager before she'd been in the hotel half an hour. 'There's a spot of ink on the carpet,' she complained (according to the paper). 'I must have another carpet at once.' Now do tell me, Simone (I'm very discreet!) did that really happen?"

"It did, Madame," the maid admitted. "Though how it got to these sacred journalists——"

"And did the manager say to Mademoiselle, 'We have had half the kings of Europe in this suite since that spot appeared, Miss Phayre, and not one of them mentioned it!'"

"His words were to that effect, Miladi, so far as I remember. But——"

"Oh, then you *were* in the room? What fun! You can tell me if Juliet—if Mademoiselle replied that a spotted carpet might be good enough for a king; it wasn't good enough for a Phayre."

Simone flung out her hands, palm upward. They

were beautifully manicured hands, as carefully tended as her mistress's. And as she smiled her teeth showed very white. When her face was grave, she looked somewhat sullen, and might be thirty-five; but the smile was rejuvenating. It put her back to twenty-eight, and made her almost handsome as well as *chic*. "Miladi has known Mademoiselle since her schooldays, is it not?" she hedged. "Miladi will be able to judge as well as if I told her whether Mademoiselle would have made that answer."

"I thought it rang true when I read it!" laughed Lady West. "But Simone, when you say I have 'known Mademoiselle since her schooldays', you make me sound awfully antique. We were at Madame de Sain's together. I came over to England the year I left, and married poor Sir Algy only three months after I was presented." She thought it best to hammer these details into Simone's head, in case the woman really *was* in touch with those back-door, kitchen-stairs reporters. Then, to give an air of carelessness to her words, she turned the subject. "Perhaps you might let Mademoiselle know I've come. Parker told me that she was lying down—that she'd promised her uncle to rest till tea time. So I wouldn't have her disturbed. But if her hair is being washed, she might let me in."

"I will ask Miladi," said Simone. "I came to the salon to see if the curtains were drawn. If Madame permits!" She tripped with her short,

high-heeled step first to one window, then the other, and closed the draperies of old-rose brocade. Having done this, she pattered out of the room.

Emmy West's eyes followed the thin but graceful figure in black silk. "Simone is a character!" she thought. And she wondered what the maid's secret opinion was of this marriage which would take place next day; the richest American heiress with the poorest British duke!

Left alone again, Emmy wriggled up from her nest of cushions, and beguiled the time in examining the wedding gifts once more. This did not take long, as the marriage had been suddenly hurried on by special license, and friends of Juliet Phayre and the Duke of Claremanagh had had only a few days to send in their offerings. Emmy had made this uninvited visit with the object of admiring a certain one of Juliet's presents, but she had already informed herself that it was not on show with the rest. Unless the bride-elect refused to see her, she did not intend to leave Harridge's without a glimpse—or anyhow, news—of it.

When she had wandered languidly round the three or four tables on which jewel cases, gold, silver, china, and tortoise-shell things were spread, she propped her own black-edged card conspicuously in front of a Sevres-framed mirror, and bent down for a hasty peep at her face in its oval. She wondered if her hair were a tiny touch too red. She liked it, herself,

and thought the heart-shaped white face, with its wide-apart black eyes set in that copper halo, a siren face. In the weeds of a war-widow it seemed to her that she was almost irresistible, but she could not help realizing that there were people who did resist her. The Duke was one. And an attractive cousin of Juliet's, John Manners, was another. She was vaguely aware that her own taste was decidedly vivid. Perhaps the hair *was* rather red! She had had it "bobbed" since Juliet came to London, because it worried her that Juliet should look years younger than she. No one would take Lady West for twenty-seven, but she had been an "old girl" and Juliet a "new girl," the year they met at school. Juliet was twenty-three now, and she, Emmy, had gone back to twenty-five. One had to be that, if one had married before the war!

Quickly she dusted on a little powder from her vanity box, and accentuated the cupid's bow of her lips with a stick of red salve, for it was possible that Claremanagh might "breeze in." It would be like him! This thought was still in her mind when a door behind her opened. She turned nervously, tucking the lip-salve into her gold mesh bag, for just now the Duke was having a craze for baby complexions without make-up. But it was not the Duke. It was a girl, standing in the doorway between bedroom and salon.

"Hello, Emmy!" she said.

"Hello, Juliet!" said Emmy. And suddenly she felt years older than she had felt a moment ago. Juliet Phayre was such a big baby!

The girl wore a pale pink chiffon thing which she probably considered a dressing gown. It was embroidered with wild roses and banded with swans-down, and no practical person would have dreamed of keeping it on for a shampoo. Juliet, however, thought herself sufficiently protected with a towel over her shoulders—a silvery damask towel under which her bare, girlish arms hung down. Over the towel streamed masses of hair in long, wet strands, which must be bright golden-brown when dry. These fell—weighted with water—nearly to her knees, and from their curly ends drops poured like unstrung pearls. She was so tall and slender, and brilliant rose-and-white, that she would have looked to a poet like Undine just out of her fountain.

"You extravagant thing," Lady West scolded, "to spoil a lovely boudoir gown like that!"

"Simone gets it to-morrow as a perquisite, with all my old things," Juliet dismissed the subject. "She said you'd been here an age, so I thought I'd better come in. I'll dry my hair before the fire. Presently we'll have tea."

So saying, she sat down tailor-fashion on a long, fat velvet cushion which lay in front of the low fender.

"Evidently you're not expecting the Duke," laughed Lady West.

"No-o," said the girl. "But I'm expecting a letter from him—or something."

"You haven't got the pearls on show with your other presents, I see," remarked her friend. "I don't blame you! Of course, Parker is doing the watch-dog act outside; and only your *bestest* pals come up. Still, the pearls are frightfully valuable. And you can never tell! But do, *do* let me see them. I'm dying to!"

"I haven't got them yet," Juliet confessed.

"Not got them?" gasped the elder woman. "You're joking. Why"—and she laughed with great gaiety—"one *marries* Claremanagh for his pearls!"

"Does one?" Juliet took her up. "I know whole populations of females who'd give *their* pearls to marry him, for—himself!"

This told Emmy West that the bride-to-be knew she had been scratched, and was ready to scratch back. For an instant Emmy hesitated whether to be sweet or sharp, and decided to compromise. "By Jove, you *are* in love, aren't you?" she said.

"I am," Juliet admitted. "I don't care a rap about being a duchess. That sort of thing seems—somehow old-fashioned since the war. And I don't think I ever *was* a snob, thank goodness."

Emmy wondered if this were another "dig." *She* had been a Chicago girl, and only a "tuppenny half-penny" heiress, compared to Juliet Phayre; but she

had wanted a title, and had paid all she could afford for a mere baronet, such as her few hundred thousand dollars would buy. On the sofa once more facing her low-seated hostess, she looked Juliet full in the eyes; but Juliet's were innocent, even dreamy. "I'd have snapped at my Boy if he'd been just a Tommy when I met him Over There, instead of a perfectly gorgeous Guardsman," the girl went on. "But, of course, I *do* want the pearls! I wouldn't be human if I didn't; everyone talks about them so much, even my Cousin Jack Manners, and says they're so marvellous. I expect they are what Pat is sending around this evening."

"Sending around!" repeated the other. "You talk as if—as if they were a box of chocolates! Claremanagh is the careless-est creature on earth, I know. And he has been—er—very careless with the pearls. But I don't think even he would be as bad as that."

"Why not?" asked the girl to whom most jewels meant little. "If he sent them by Old Nick, that dear, quaint man of his, they'd be safer than if he brought them himself. I never knew before that he was superstitious. But he is. It's bad luck for a Claremanagh to see his bride the day before the wedding. *Creepy* things have happened, it seems, according to an old story! So he said he wasn't running risks. For some reason, he couldn't give me his present before to-day. So that's why the thing is to come by messenger, you see."

"I see," echoed Emmy. "And you're sure the present *will* be the pearls?"

This was rather an impudent question to ask, especially for one who knew the Duke's circumstances; but, for a wonder, Juliet did not seem to mind. She answered quite easily, "Oh, I suppose so. Don't the Claremanagh men always give them to their brides?"

"I believe they have dutifully handed them over *so far*—for several generations, since the pearls came into their family in that exciting way," said Lady West. "But you know, Peter—I mean Claremanagh—is very independent, and quite—er—a law unto himself."

"Why do you call him 'Peter'?" the girl branched off from the subject. "He has about a dozen names, I know, but I hadn't heard that 'Peter' was one. *My* selection from the lot is Pat!"

"Oh, 'Peter' was only a silly nickname I made up for him. 'Peter Pan', because he just isn't the sort who ever grows up!" Emmy explained elaborately. "Of course he was a lot with Algy and me the first year I married—before the war spoilt everything for everyone. And then, when I took up Red Cross work in France, after poor Algy——"

"I know," Juliet ruthlessly interrupted. "That was where and when *I* came on the scene."

"It was," agreed Emmy, in a flat voice. "You came, you saw, you conquered. But we were talking of the Tsarina pearls. I do hope the Duke *is* 'de-

livering the goods', as we say in our country. I don't mind confessing to you, my angel child, I dropped in hoping for a private view."

"Oh, I guessed *that* the minute Simone told me you were here, and determined to wait!" Juliet laughed like a naughty child who dares a "grown-up" to slap it. Emmy's ears tingled. The girl's tone, though intimate and friendly, told her how unimportant she was in the future Duchess's scheme of things. She had always envied Juliet, and had an old grudge against the heiress for refusing her brother, Bill Lowndes. Now she suddenly hated her. Instead of inflicting a kittenish scratch or two, she wanted to strike at Juliet Phayre's heart.

"Well," she excused herself, "I never saw the pearls, except—er—at a *distance*."

"You have seen them, then?" Juliet exclaimed. "How was that? Pat's mother died years before you knew him, and only the Duchess is supposed to wear the pearls, isn't she?"

"Only the Duchess is *supposed* to wear them."

Juliet sat up straight on the velvet cushion. Her hair was drying beautifully now. The red background of fireglow lit it to flame, so that Lady West saw the slight figure surrounded by a nimbus. "Ever since Pat and I were engaged, you've been hinting at something queer, or *secret*, about that rope of pearls, Emmy," the girl blazed. "Now, *out* with it, please! Tell me what you mean."

The elder woman was taken aback. "Don't you *know* what I mean?" she temporized.

"No, I don't," snapped Juliet. "But I'm sure it's something unpleasant."

"At least, I had no intention of telling you," Lady West snapped back. "I wouldn't distress you for worlds, dear, especially on your *wedding eve*."

"Wedding eve be—'jizzled!'" inelegantly remarked the bride-elect. "You sound quite early Edwardian! If you don't tell me, I shall think the thing worse than it is."

"You had better ask Claremanagh, or Jack Manners, who is a pal of his," said Emmy.

"I can't, till I have an idea what to ask them about."

"Ask whether Lyda Pavoya ever—no, I *won't* say it!"

"Whether she ever wore the pearls? That's what you were going to say!"

"So you *did* know?"

"I didn't. And I don't now. I only know what you have in your mind. I don't believe she was allowed to wear the pearls."

"Why should you believe it? And even if she did, it was before you knew Peter—the Duke. Or anyhow, it was before you were *engaged*. It was when she was dancing for the Polish Relief Fund in Paris, that I saw——"

"You saw what?"

"Saw—her."

"Emmy! You *didn't* see her wearing the Tsarina pearls? It's not possible."

"Why, of course you must be right, dear. Even though they are *blue*, they'd be like any other pearls, wouldn't they, *to see at a distance*."

"That's just what you said about Pat's pearls five minutes ago: that you'd seen them only 'at a distance.'"

Lady West did not reply. She put on a stricken, trapped expression, which went well with her widow's weeds. The two gazed into each other's eyes, each waiting for the other to speak. Neither heard a sound at the door until a respectable voice—such a voice as is never possessed save by a British butler or valet—announced "His Grace the Duke of Claremanagh."

CHAPTER II

THE EXPLANATION

A PERFECTLY charming young man came in—a young man so delightful to look at that it seemed almost too much that he should be a duke. With that merry brown face (the war had left a scar across cheek and temple), those Celtic grey eyes, that jet-black hair, that “figure for a fencer,” and above all that engaging grin of his, the merest Nobody might hope to make his mark as Somebody.

“Breezing in” (as Emmy had put it), he smiled his nice smile that brought a dimple like a cut line into each thin, tanned cheek. The smile was for Juliet, whose velvet throne was opposite the door, and for her he waved aloft a small, sealed white parcel. Then he saw Lady West, and his expression changed. As the saying is, his “face fell,” but in half a second he had controlled his features.

“How do you do?” he enquired. His voice was as pleasant as his grin, but there was a slight stiffness in his tone for the red-haired war-widow.

“I’m going strong, thanks! Going in every sense of the word,” Emmy assured him. “I should have taken myself off before now, only Juliet pretended

not to be expecting you. Of course, the day before the wedding *is* supposed by old-fashioned folk to be close time for brides, where their loving bridegrooms are concerned, and so——”

“I’m not old-fashioned,” said Claremanagh.

“Rather not! I’ve every reason for knowing that. We all have. But Juliet had some story about a ‘bad luck’ superstition. I thought you were the last man to be superstitious, Irish as you are, but it didn’t sound like a joke——”

“It wasn’t a joke. I’m as superstitious as the deuce about one or two things,” the man confessed. “Juliet wasn’t ‘pretending’ but”— and he turned to the girl— “I had to come. There was something I didn’t want to explain in a letter, and—hang ‘bad luck!’ It’s a cross dog that would dare bite *us*.”

As Emmy West saw the look he gave Juliet, she felt as though her heart had been sharply pinched between a thumb and a finger. She had believed till now that his “superstition” was an excuse for spending his time with someone whose society he preferred to the bride’s. Yet here he was, bouncing in like a bomb, with that eager light in his eyes, and in his hand a packet which *might* be the pearls!

When Juliet explained that there “was a reason” why Claremanagh “couldn’t give his present till to-day,” an exciting thought had tumbled into Emmy’s head: What if Lyda Pavoya had refused to return the pearls he’d been teased into lending her, and

had taken them to New York, where she was now dancing? Emmy visioned the poor Duke frantically cabling, the moment he had secured the American heiress; or perhaps engaging a lawyer to frighten the Polish siren. Lyda wouldn't be easy to frighten, Emmy imagined, admiringly. (She, in fact, admired the dancer so sincerely, that her own attempts at sirenhood were copied from Pavoya.) Even if Lyda had disgorged the booty, would there have been time for it to arrive from across the Atlantic? Only the opening of that little parcel would show, and Emmy's jealous pain was complicated by curiosity.

Still, she decided, it would be useless to wear out her welcome by lingering. The chances were that Claremanagh wouldn't break those thrilling seals till she had gone. Besides, Juliet was in a state of suppressed fury, and was capable in that mood of banishing her with rudeness. In some moods, the girl was capable of *anything!* So Lady West "kissed air" in the neighbourhood of Miss Phayre's burning cheeks, and accepted defeat with one sole satisfaction: If the pearls had come—or if they ever came!—she had pretty well spoiled them for the future Duchess.

"*Au revoir*, dearest child," she said. "I shall be in church to-morrow, of course. *Au revoir*, Peter, and good luck in spite of the Claremanagh curse. I do hope it won't put on seven-league boots and follow you to New York."

"Leather's too dear since the war for superannuated old curses to buy seven-league boots," replied the Duke, unflatteringly prompt in opening the door.

The pretty lady went to it with wormlike meekness, but turned on the threshold. "If I meet the Curse, I'll tell it to mind its business," she laughed. "The Claremanaghs have had enough bad luck. You'll create a new record, working out your democratic notions in a new country, with one or two *old friends* there to applaud them."

With this exit speech she put herself in charge of Parker, who would ring up the lift for her. The Duke shut the salon door, and turned to the girl. He didn't even say "Thank goodness, the woman's gone!" He seemed to have forgotten her existence.

"Heavens, what hair you have!" he exclaimed. "I knew it must be gorgeous, but I didn't dream of *this*. To-night I *shall* dream of it! By rights, I oughtn't to have seen this show till to-morrow night, ought I? But I'm glad I have. All your beauties bursting upon me at once would be too much for my brain."

"Don't make fun of me," Juliet laughed, with a wistfulness rather pathetic in so pretty and so rich a girl.

"Make fun of you!" Claremanagh snatched her up from the low seat, and crushed the yielding, thinly clad young body in his arms. On the sweet-scented,

damp hair he rained kisses. "Am I a wooden man? Take that—and that, to punish you! Mavourneen—if it were *to-morrow!*"

Between warm joy and chilling doubt Juliet Phayre shivered. If only she could believe him—believe that he cared for her, and not for the money! She almost *had* believed—before Emmy West came.

The girl burned to tell "Pat" what Emmy had said and hinted. If he could reassure her, it would be balm on a wound never quite healed. But—*if he couldn't*. If questioning should make bad things worse? Then she would wish in vain that she'd "let sleeping dogs lie," because she loved the man too much to give him up. She had wanted him as a child wants the moon, ever since the day she, a gilt-edged Red Cross nurse, had met him, a soldier on leave, in Paris. Now she had got him—or almost—and the future *might* be so wonderful!

He had promised her uncle, Henry Phayre, to live for at least half of each year in America, there to work as other men worked (Phayre would supply the employment), and Juliet had looked forward to being proud of her adorable husband, happy with him; a living proof—the pair of them—that an American girl can marry a duke for himself, not for his title; that a duke can make an American heiress his wife for love. But now, Emmy had raked up those old rags of gossip, nearly forgotten. And Juliet had read in the paper only a few days ago about

Pavoya's first night in New York; the furore her "wild eastern dancing and strange, Slavic fascination" had created. The girl felt sick at heart as she asked herself if Pat's pleasure in the thought of "seeing New York" had any connection with Pavoya's presence there.

It was all she could do not to purr out her complaints of "that *cat*, Emmy West," but native prudence prevailed over hot impulse. She enjoyed as much as Emmy permitted Pat's praise of her glorious hair (surely Pavoya's wasn't as long or thick, and probably its "rusty red" was due to dye), and then she reminded him of the parcel.

"Is it my present from you?" she asked, almost shyly, nodding toward the table where Pat had thrown the neat white square.

Instantly he let her go, and took the little parcel again in his hand.

"Yes, sweet, it *is* my present for you," he said. "But *not* the present I wanted to give you. That's why I risked the 'curse' and came to explain."

"Oh!" was the girl's noncommittal answer. Her heart sank. The pearls were not in the packet, she knew now, but her disappointment was not so much in missing them as in the thought that Emmy could say "I told you so!"

"Before you open these silly seals, and see what I've brought," the Duke went on, "I want to make my explanation, and be sure you understand the

whole business. Come and sit by me on the sofa, will you?"

He drew her down beside him, and gathered her close.

"Of course, you know all about our pearls, the one ewe lamb of ancient glory left to us poor Claremanaghs," he said.

"I don't know *all* about them," amended Juliet, her heart missing a beat.

"Tell me just what you do know, and then I shan't bore you with repetitions."

"Oh, people have told me things," she hedged. "Didn't a Tsarina of Russia sell the pearls to some old ancestor of yours?"

"Good lord, no!" he chuckled. "Never was a Claremanagh so stony broke as yours truly; yet never was there one since the days of pterodactyls who could run to the price of a Tsarina's pearls; that is, in *lucre*. My great-great-grandfather bought them with kisses. But joking apart, it's rather a romantic tale. He was a soldier and offered his services to Russia because he'd seen a portrait of the Tsarina, which the Prince of Wales had, and fell in love with it. Well, she fell in love with him, too, at sight. He wasn't bad to look at, judging from his portrait——"

"Was he like you?" cut in Juliet.

Pat laughed. "They say so. When we can get those Pill people out of Castle Claremanagh (their

lease has a year to run) you shall tell me if you find a likeness. There was an 'affair' between the two; and great-great-grandfather Pat (he was Patrick, too, like all the eldest sons) had it politely intimated to him, through his friend Wales, that he'd better come home—a marriage had been arranged for him. He'd not have stirred a foot if it hadn't been for his Love. She begged him to go. There was a plot to murder him, it seems, and as for her, she'd ceased to be very popular with the Tsar, her husband. She made her sweetheart promise to marry the English girl, and she gave him the rope of pearls which since then have been called after her—the 'Tsarina's pearls.' They were for his wife, as a gift from her, so the girl shouldn't hate the thought of their love."

"I should have hated it all the more!" cried Juliet. "I wouldn't have *worn* the things if I'd been his bride."

"Well, as *my* bride I hope you will wear them often. They'll be dashed becoming to your blondness, for the things are unique in one way: they're *blue*; a hundred and eighty immense and perfectly matched blue pearls. Never has anything been seen like them, the expert johnnies say."

"Was the Tsarina a blonde?" the girl wanted to know.

"A copper-headed blonde. You shall see her miniature."

Juliet said nothing. But she thought of Lyda Pavoya's head. She had never seen the Polish

dancer, but she had heard her described: the traditional "siren-green" eyes, white face, and red hair. And she knew that Emmy West modelled herself, so far as Nature permitted, on Pavoya.

"In the ordinary sense of the word, the Tsarina pearls aren't an heirloom in our family," Claremanagh continued. "But the first bride who received them passed on the gift to her eldest son's bride. So it has gone on ever since. The thing falls to the heir, or his wife; and it's tacitly understood that neither the rope as a whole, nor even one of the pearls, shall be sold. Well, I came into the inheritance (if you can call it that) seven years ago, when I was twenty-one. I'm afraid I'd have sold the bally thing more than once if I could have done it in common decency. But I couldn't. So there you *are!*"

"What *did* you do with it?" Juliet ventured, half dreading the answer. Her head was pressed close to Pat's shoulder. She could not look up at his face, but she thought a muscle jumped in the arm that held her, and that there was a sudden change in his tone.

"Do with it?" he echoed. "Why, what should I do but keep it in the bank waiting for the Lady of my Dreams? I couldn't wear it round my neck, you know! But, well, I did get it out of the bank now and then, to show to beautiful beings who begged to see it. Once it was in a Loan Exhibition for the benefit of something or other, I forget what. The

confession I have to make, though, is this: only two months before I met the dearest girl on earth I was so hard up I'd have had to grind a monkey-organ in the streets if I hadn't been engaged in fighting for King and Country. I'd had some beastly bad luck with a speculation an alleged pal had let me in for, and honest Injun, I didn't know which way to turn, until a chap I know offered me two hundred thousand francs on the security of the pearls."

"*Francs?*" echoed Juliet.

"Yes. The man's a Frenchman. And the business was done in France. He's a dashed good fellow in his way. But it's a queer way. He's a kind of gilded, super money-lender. His transactions are only with his friends, and the interest he takes is fair and square: twenty per cent. instead of sixty or so, as the sharks do—to my bitter knowledge. With what I got from Louis Mayen I paid my debts, and hung onto a bit, a few thousands. Then, two months later, I met you—and the fat was in the fire!"

"How, in the fire?"

"Why, I made up my mind at first sight to grab you if I could——"

Juliet broke out laughing like a child, forgetful of her secret burden. "*Did you—really?* So did I you!"

"Bold hussy!" He kissed her with passion. "But it was worse for me than you. I'd just lost my chance of giving you your legitimate wedding

present—if you'd have me. The day you said 'Yes', instead of walking on air I could have thrown myself in the sea, I felt such a fool."

"Silly boy!" cried the girl. "Any real money-lender, or even your super, gilded one, would have let you have all you wanted if you'd said you were marrying Silas Phayre's heiress. I mayn't know much about business, but I know that!"

"And I mayn't be a saint, but I'm not a cad," Claremanagh capped her. "I wouldn't go to a money-lender on the strength of being engaged to you. I don't say that if Louis Mayen had been in France then I'd not have wheedled the pearls back from him, on the mere strength of friendship, and an I. O. U., or some such arrangement. He'd have trusted me," Pat laughed; "anyhow, in the circumstances! But you and I were engaged a fortnight after the Armistice, you remember. Just a week before our own Great Day (yours and mine) Mayen went to Russia with a lot of important Frenchmen of Hebrew blood, on a diplomatic mission. He had a bad time in Petrograd. He and his lot were stuck into the prison of St. Peter and St. Paul, by the Bolchies. I didn't know where the pearls were and couldn't find out. That was two months ago. But after six weeks in a cell, Mayen was released by order of Lenine; and it was expected in Paris that he and the rest would be back in France by now.

“We were there ourselves—you and your uncle in Paris, and I at G. H. Q. you know, till just ten days ago—though it seems longer. And I was hoping against hope that Mayen might turn up. I wouldn’t say a word to you, for I didn’t want you to be disappointed. And even as late as last night I wouldn’t quite give up. Your Cousin Jack Manners, who is the best fellow on earth, has been watching things for me in Paris. He’d heard that Mayen had quietly sneaked back, and hadn’t let any one know, in order to get a good rest cure. But this turns out to be a *canard*. Now you see why I had to go out and find you a ‘fairing’ as the Scots say. I couldn’t afford anything worth while unless I borrowed; so I thought things over, and decided that you’d prefer a little remembrance of our wedding, bought with my own ‘pocket-money,’ and supplemented by a souvenir of my mother. Am I right?”

“Absolutely! Whatever you give me, I shall love it,” said Juliet. “I wouldn’t care if it cost sixpence. It’s from *you*; that makes the value for me. But, Pat, I can’t bear to think of your being poor! You won’t be after to-morrow. I haven’t liked to talk of such things, but I told Uncle Henry I wanted a million dollars settled on you, to use as you pleased. Surely he did what I——”

“He did, my child. But I ‘wasn’t taking any’. I meant to tell you this myself when we were old married people—a week after the wedding, let’s say!

But since you've brought up the subject, we might as well have it out. Your money is going to restore Claremanagh, and the jolly old London house in Queen Anne's gate that my great-grandfather bought. I don't so much mind that. You'll enjoy the places. And it won't be till the tenants there turn out. I'm to have a screw from your uncle for pretending to work in the S. P. Phayre Bank: a hundred dollars a week to begin with (he offered more, but I wouldn't have it), about a fiftieth part of which I'll really earn. But even that will bring me nearly a hundred pounds a month, so I shan't disgrace my wife by wearing paper collars or elastic-sided boots, or not getting my hair cut. Then, as my earning power increases, so will my pay. Besides, your noble guardian wants to buy my place at Maidenhead, when it's free, next spring. He'll give sixty thousand pounds, which will leave me fifty when the mortgage is paid off; and Mr. Phayre will advise me about investments. So you see, you're not marrying a pauper after all, my good girl! As for the pearls, it's only a delay—an annoying delay. When Mayen really does get back to Paris, he'll find a letter from me containing a post-dated cheque for the two hundred thousand francs, and interest. That will come out of the fifty thousand pounds, and still leave me a decent pile. Mayen will at once take steps to get the pearls to me."

"But we'll be in New York," objected Juliet. "How

can Monsieur Mayen send them without danger of their being stolen?"

"Trust him to arrange that," Claremanagh soothed her. "There must be lots of ways. Besides, they'll be insured for their full value, which is supposed to be—intrinsic, not sentimental—one hundred thousand pounds. What I hope is, they'll be in time for you to make a show in your box at the opera—Metropolitan Opera House, you call it, don't you? You see, I've been reading up a guide book to New York! And now I've made all my explanations and excuses, my darling, you'd better open the poor little box."

His arm still round her, the girl broke the jeweller's seals. Inside the white paper was a white velvet case, and inside the white velvet case was a string of white pearls. They were small, but good, and from them depended an old-fashioned, open-faced locket containing an ivory miniature of a beautiful boy.

"The pearls are from me," Pat said. "The locket and miniature are from my mother. She used always to wear the locket. And when she died, eight years ago, one of the last things she did was to give it to me, 'for my bride'."

Juliet Phayre would not have been human if she had not forgotten, in that moment, both Emmy West and Lyda Pavoya.

CHAPTER III

“TO MEET THE DUCHESS”

MRS. LOWNDES, Emmy West's sister-in-law, was giving a luncheon for the Duchess of Claremanagh; and the Duchess was late. Nine lovely ladies (including the hostess) were waiting for her in the Futurist drawing room of an apartment overlooking the Park. It was not to all tastes a beautiful drawing room, but it was expensive for all purses. So was the apartment; too expensive, Billy Lowndes' friends said, for his. As for the ladies, each one was beautiful, or her clothes were; for Nat Lowndes had chosen her guests with the special view of impressing the Duchess, whom Billy had tried to marry when she was Miss Phayre.

The invitations were for one-fifteen, and before one-thirty everyone had arrived—except the Duchess. By twenty to two the nine voices were chattering with almost abnormal gaiety, but ears and eyes were secretly on the alert. Natalie Lowndes was not precisely in the Duchess' "set", or if she was, moved on the chilled outer edge of it. These women who chatted in her startling salon would have preferred other engagements, if they had not been asked "to

meet the Duchess of Claremanagh.” Most of them knew that Billy had desperately wanted Juliet Phayre, and that Juliet had been at school with his sister, Lady West, now in London. Their private opinion was that the Duchess had accepted for Lady West’s sake rather than Mrs. Lowndes’; and as the minutes lagged, they wondered if the chief guest were purposely proving her slight esteem of the circle.

This idea ruffled their vanity, and as they talked, glancing at wrist watches, their irritation grew. Natalie who, like her husband, was from the Middle West, felt the atmosphere of her overheated room fall to zero. She began to feel sick at heart, and tears pricked her eyelids. But she kept a brave front.

No one had spoken yet of the delay, nor of the lady who caused it; but at a quarter to two it seemed better to be frank.

“I can’t think what *can* have happened to Juliet!” Natalie said. (Nat was one of those women who always called her smartest acquaintances by their Christian names—behind their backs.) “We’ll wait five minutes more—not a moment longer. I’m sure she wouldn’t wish it.”

“Royalties are always so prompt,” said Mrs. Sam Selby-Saunders, who knew the habits of kings and queens from the Sunday Supplements. “Evidently dukes—or anyhow duchesses—don’t follow their example.”

“Something *must* be the matter,” Nat defended

the absent. "At first Juliet was afraid she couldn't accept to-day. You know, there's a meeting this morning at Mrs. Van Esten's, to arrange details of the wonderful roof garden show in aid of the Armenians. Juliet had to be present, as she's on the committee. But at last she decided she could get away in time. She must have been kept."

Nobody spoke for a minute. If there had been only Ten First Families in New York, Mrs. Van Esten would still have been high on the list. She was the organizer of the proposed entertainment, the plans for which were thrilling the town; and if this business were keeping the Duchess, she was almost excusable. Anyhow, nobody's feelings need be hurt.

Suddenly, in the midst of the pause, Miss Solomon laughed. Her father was as rich as Silas Phayre had been, and there was no reason why she shouldn't be a duchess, too, some day, when travel abroad became easier. "I did hear the *loveliest* thing!" she chuckled. "I wonder if any of you have heard it? . . . That Mrs. Van Esten meant to propose at the committee meeting to-day the name of Lyda Pavoya."

"Good gracious, for *what*?" gasped Nat Lowndes.

"To dance at the entertainment, of course. Mrs. Van E.'s maid and my maid are cousins. So I should say it was true. You know Mrs. Van E. is notorious for never listening to gossip. She prides

herself on ‘being above it’. Very silly, *I* think. Because one can make such awful ‘gaffs’ if one doesn’t know the seamy side of things.”

“No wonder the Duchess is late!” cried Mrs. Sam. “She has probably had to go home between the meeting and here to faint or have a fit.”

Nobody could help laughing, and nobody tried to help it. There was a weekly paper in New York—a paper called the *Inner Circle*. This publication one got one’s maid to buy and hide under a pile of books until it could be read. The moment all its paragraphs had been absorbed the paper was destroyed, thus making it possible to say, “the *Inner Circle!* I wouldn’t give the wretched rag house-room!” The inside middle pages of the “rag” were headed “Let’s Whisper!” And at the time of the Phayre-Claremanagh marriage, two months ago, the choicest whispering had concerned the Duke’s flirtation with Lyda Pavoya.

“It is easier to break off a flirtation than an engagement, because you can’t be sued for breach of promise,” was one *mot* of “The Whisperer,” and it was intimated that the Duke had profited by this immunity when he proposed to Miss Phayre. “But what about the pearls?” was a question which no one had forgotten, and for which everyone wanted an answer. Oh, yes, it would be a rich joke if Mrs. Van Esten proposed Pavoya for a “star turn” at the Armenian charity entertainment!

"If it's true," said Nat, "Juliet couldn't very well refuse her consent to have Pavoya. That would make things worse. As it is, none of us could help noticing how she has kept the Duke away from every single opera where Pavoya has danced. Not once has he or she been in their box on a Pavoya night. But——"

The company hung on the word, as Nat drew in her breath, and paused for effect. Never were they to know, however, what revelation was to follow that "but," for at this instant Mrs. Lowndes' butler announced "The Duchess of Claremanagh," and left out the preface of "Her Grace."

His omission upset the hostess so much that she stammered over her greeting, and forgot what she had read in a book called "English Etiquette" about introducing a duchess. Juliet Claremanagh was so contrite for her own guilt, however, that she had no thought for others' shortcomings.

"Oh, I'm *dreadfully* sorry to be late! Do forgive me, everyone!" she cried, like a penitent schoolgirl. "I was kept so long at that meeting, and then I had to dash home for a minute. My husband had made me *promise*. You see, this is supposed to be a great day for me. The pearls—perhaps you've heard of them?—are due at last!"

"Perhaps" they had heard of the pearls! The Duchess was forgiven at once. Introductions were hastily made. As the party sat down, the guest

of honour pulling off her gloves, she went on with her excuses. Evidently she was willing to talk of the pearls, so Nat ventured an entering wedge.

“Emmy wrote me they had to be re-strung,” she said. “And that the most skilled pearl-stringer in England wasn’t demobilized, or something; so you had to wait.” What Emmy had really written was, “This is the story they’re putting round.” But it would be exciting to get Juliet’s answer, and watch Juliet’s face.

The Duchess was somewhat paler than Juliet Phayre had been, for she and the Duke had made a huge success in New York, and were in such request that they kept appalling hours. But she was rosier than she had ever been as she replied that, yes, she had had to wait. But at last the pearls had been sent. They were on the *Britannia*, in care of a trusted person; and that person had “wirelessed” that he would be at the house by half-past twelve. Unluckily, however, the *Britannia* had been delayed outside for a sister ship to leave the dock. She—Juliet—had gone home from Mrs. Van Esten’s to receive the messenger, with her husband. But the former and Pat’s trusted man, sent to meet him, had not arrived. She had waited a few minutes, and had then come on in the car to Mrs. Lowndes’. Of course, the auto had been detained for ages, at two or three crossings! It was always like that if

one were late! And now she could not be at home when the pearls appeared, for there were engagements, which couldn't be broken, for the whole of the afternoon.

After all, the luncheon was a great success. The Duchess atoned for her sins by being "sweet" to everyone, much sweeter than she had troubled herself to be, as a spoiled young girl, with strangers. She was as pleased as a child with the delicious dishes ordered, almost with prayer, by Nat; and when she was obliged to go, after coffee and cigarettes, she left behind her a charming impression. Mrs. Selby-Saunders and Miss Solomon and all the rest made up for their sharp speeches by praising the bride's beauty and exquisite clothes.

"She's much prettier than she used to be," generously said Nat (who had never seen Juliet as Miss Phayre), "and the Duke must be a fool if he likes Lyda Pavoya better. If he neglects his wife, she won't have any trouble finding someone else who *won't*."

"What about that cousin of hers, Jack Manners, who used to be in love with her when she was almost a child?—a nephew of her mother's," asked Mrs. Selby-Saunders. "An awfully nice fellow! She ought to have married him. They say he volunteered before America joined the Allies, because she refused him——"

"He's in France still," Nat supplied the informa-

tion eagerly. "My sister-in-law, Lady West, met him there——"

"I saw in some newspaper that he was to sail for home on the *Britannia*," said Miss Solomon.

"Perhaps *he* is the messenger bringing the pearls!"

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTER WITH THE TSARINA'S SEAL

JOHN MANNERS was not the messenger bringing the pearls. Even if he had been asked to bring them, he would not have accepted the responsibility of escorting Claremanagh's "ewe lamb" across the Atlantic. He knew more about those pearls than he wanted to know, for he had been in love with Juliet Phayre before he began to like Claremanagh—to like him in spite of himself, in spite of natural jealousy, and in spite of prejudice. It was a mere coincidence that he should be on the same ship with Monsieur Mayen's messenger, for with the return of Mayen from Russia, Manners' friendly services for the Duke came to an end.

His services for France were ended also; and he was keenly interested in his own emotions as he touched the bell on the front door of the Phayre house. How would it feel to meet Juliet married—and married to a man with whom fate had queerly forced him into friendship?

The front door was a very elaborate door. It was mostly composed of old wrought iron so delicately carved as to be like iron lacework. Silas Phayre

had imported it from an ancient *palazzo* in Florence and, characteristically, had it backed with modern plate glass. The inner side of this crystal screen was curtained with creamy silk tissue, thus forming a sort of mirror for any one waiting to enter. Manners gazed vaguely at his reflection behind the pattern of wrought iron, and his sense of humour noted that thwarted love had not made of him a haggard wreck. Fighting in France had browned and hardened him. He was lean, but far from frail. The dark tan on his face caused his yellowish hair to seem straw-coloured in contrast, and his eyes boyishly blue. This, and the khaki uniform he still wore, gave him an air of being younger than he was—twenty-eight: and the man and his image were exchanging an amused grin when a new reflection appeared in the glass. Mechanically Manners turned, and found himself face to face with a woman. She had paused at the foot of the marble steps, and hesitated, as if the sight of someone on the threshold had upset her calculations. But at this instant the door was thrown open—not by one of the imported English footmen whom Manners knew of old, but by an elderly Japanese. The yellow face gave Jack a shock, but he realized that British and American youths had been better employed than as footmen since he himself had gone to France.

The Japanese looked past the officer in khaki to the lady, whom he appeared to recognize and even

to be expecting. This look settled matters for her. She decided to keep to her original plan. With a slight inclination of the head to Manners, she stepped briskly into the vestibule. Behind her, she left a faint trail of alluring fragrance. Even Jack Manners, who disliked artificial perfumes, breathed it in with pleasure. He had never smelled anything quite like it before; but he thought of an eastern garden in moonlight, and the thrill of that picture mingled with another thrill. He had recognized the woman. He had seen her before, but only on the stage, and now she was veiled with one of those patterned veils almost as concealing for an ordinary woman as a mask. But this was not an ordinary woman. It was Pavoya, the Polish dancer; the "divine Pavoya," the "diabolic Pavoya," according to the point of view. Even lacking the green glint of slanted eyes, the fiery glow of close-banded hair through the veil, that figure in the plain black dress would have been unmistakable. Portrait painters, photographers, post-impressionists, and caricaturists had rendered it familiar, in all lands, to those who had not seen the dancer herself. Manners could hardly believe in the truth of his swift impression. It was almost incredible that she should come as a guest to this house. Could she have made friends with Juliet? Juliet's cousin wondered.

The thing that happened next was still more strange. The slim siren in black did not wait to be

ushered in by the servant. She flitted from vestibule to hall beyond, then vanished as if she knew where to go and was in haste to get there. The Japanese did not turn his head to look after her, but gave his attention to the man on the doorstep.

"I'm Captain Manners," said Jack. "I've come to see my cousin, the Duchess. I suppose she is at home?" He supposed this, not only because Juliet knew that he was due on the *Britannia*, and had cabled her desire to see him at once, but also because Mademoiselle Pavoya must have gone in by appointment. Even before the servant answered, however, he read in the troubled dark face that something had gone wrong.

"Please to walk in, sir," said the Japanese, in stiff, correct English. "I have a note for you from Her Grace the Duchess. She was unfortunately obliged to go out; but I think she hopes to be back early. If you will kindly walk into the Persian room, sir, I will give you the letter."

Well did Jack remember the Persian room! It had been Silas Phayre's great fad and favourite, and during his life had been used as a smoking room. Jack half expected to find Lyda Pavoya there, perhaps reading another note from Juliet; but the wonderful room, with its rare tiles and priceless rugs and exquisite old tapestries, was unoccupied. The servant placed an envelope on an antique tray of Persian enamel, and presented it with a bow.

Then he went out unobtrusively, leaving Manners to study with some interest the seal Juliet had used.

It seemed superfluous that she should use any at all, as the scrawled address showed that the writer had been in haste; but the interesting thing was the seal itself. It was Claremanagh's own seal, which he kept for his private correspondence, and the ring with which he made it had been given by the Tsarina of the Pearls to his great-great-grandfather. Jack happened to know this, because the Duke had ordered a copy made for Louis Mayen, with which to seal the box containing the pledged pearls. Claremanagh had told Jack this story before leaving France, and had pointed out the ring, which he invariably wore. The design was an eye; and the motto underneath was. "Je te regard."

"Must have given the ring to Juliet," Manners thought, as he opened the envelope. He read:

DEAR OLD BOY:

Don't think me a beast to be out. I really couldn't help it. I was dragged into accepting for a tiresome lunch party, given by a tiresome female, in my honour: Emmy West's sister-in-law. Some story has been started that I was jealous of Emmy (among other women!) with Pat. *Nonsense!* But I knew, if I refused, what the creatures would say. Besides, I couldn't be sure just when you'd turn up. And above all, I wanted a chance to see you quite, quite alone. I've got lots of things to tell you, that I couldn't tell any one else. If you call while I'm away, as I expect, stop and see Pat, who is to lunch at home, as he's got a bad cold. Then say you must go, as you have an engagement. That

will be true, because I now invite you to make an engagement with me. But if he insists on your visiting us, before you go home to Long Island, as he's sure to, do accept. You were horrid to answer my cable with a refusal, and say you had to go at once to your own place to decide on some silly old improvements you want to make. That's only an excuse, Jack, because you didn't quite see yourself staying in the house with Pat and me. But you are *much* too strong a man to mind a little thing like that. I don't believe you were ever in love with me, really. You just *thought* you were, that's all, from knowing me when I was a wee kid, and always being my *bestest pal* whom I could count on without fail.

Oh, Jack, I do count on you now, as I never did before. So you won't fail me for the first time in your life, will you? I suppose this is selfish of me, and "exactly like a woman" (as Uncle Henry used to say, whenever I wanted to do anything he didn't want me to do), but I can't help it. You'll see, when I tell you, why *nobody else* can be of any use to me in this trouble.

I *have* to write all this, though I hope to meet you so soon; because if I didn't, you might refuse Pat's most pressing invitation. And where should I be then? Don't think for an instant that I'm tired of Pat, and want a divorce or anything. It isn't that at all. I adore him as much as ever. That's where the trouble comes in! But we've had a *row*, and every day it will get worse. Why, even the seal ring, which I'm using for this letter, has become a bone of contention—among other things. This does need a seal, if ever a letter did, for it's dreadfully indiscreet and unwifely, I suppose.

Already I've eased my mind a little by pouring out my woes to you, as in old times. And now for that engagement with me, which I trust you to keep. I am supposed to go to an "At Home," which I'm not sure isn't given for me. All I *am* sure about is that I shan't be there. Instead, I'll be in the Palm Room of the Hotel Lorne (where no one we know ever goes for tea) at five

o'clock. And I shall *wait for you*, so you'll have to come. Afterward, if you haven't done it before, you can see to sending all your things to our house for a visit of *at least* a week. But we'll talk of that!

Ever your affectionate cousin,

JEWEL.

P. S. You see, I haven't forgotten your old name for me. No one except you ever called me his "Jewel."

When Manners had read this letter through, he sat with it for some moments in his hand. Then, suddenly, he roused himself to realize that it was not a document to flaunt in the open. He replaced it in the envelope, which he slipped into an inner pocket of his khaki coat. Had the Japanese told Claremanagh of his arrival, he wondered? Or had there been some secret understanding between the Duchess and her servant that Captain Manners should be left long enough in the Persian room to read and put out of sight her sealed letter? Claremanagh had his own confidential man, Nickson (known as "Old Nick"); why should not Juliet have hers? There was no reason. Yet Jack hated to think that the girl should be driven to a rather sordid expedient, and somehow this thought dragged into his head another.

"By George!" he exploded aloud. Then he bit his lip. But the thought could not be pushed away. Since Juliet was out, to whom was the visit of Lyda Pavoya being made?

The Japanese seemed to be in the confidence of more than one person in this house!

CHAPTER V

THE THIRD RINGER OF THE BELL

SIMONE had been in the act of coming downstairs, dressed for a walk with her mistress's English bulldog, Admiral Beatty, when a vision flashed through the hall: a reedlike figure in black with a glint of red hair through a patterned veil.

Simone stopped short, petrified, pulling so suddenly at the dog's leash that the reticent bull gave a grunt.

It took a great deal to petrify Simone. She had been through an earthquake in Italy. She had escaped from a burning hotel in her first year of service in New York. There had been further sensations also, and her nerves were accustomed to shocks. But to see Lyda Pavoya, the dancer, dart unannounced through the hall, when the Duke was alone in the house, went beyond everything.

She was certain, despite the veil, that the woman was Pavoya. No other creature on earth had a figure like that, or held her head so like a light flower on a stem. The Duchess was tall and slim and graceful, with a slender, long throat; but she had the

slightness of a normal, charmingly formed young girl. The Polish dancer was almost a thing supernatural, a streak of living flame made woman.

Simone's dark skin was thick, but her head was not. Her brain worked fast. Like a general at manoeuvres, it reviewed the situation at a glance. The Duke was at home because of a "cold!" He had known for days that the Duchess would be out for luncheon, and that she was safe not to return home *en surprise*. He must have invited Pavoya to come in his wife's absence. And more than this, it struck Simone that the visit of to-day could not be the first. Togo, the Japanese (of whom she was jealous because of her mistress's fancy for his services), seemed to be acquainted with the dancer. He let her pass without a word. No doubt she had been to the house before, when the Duchess and Simone were out of the way. Either the Duke or Pavoya—or both—had bribed Togo, who was playing a mean, double game between his master and mistress! The Frenchwoman resolved that she would not, after all, take Beatty for a walk. Bending down, she unfastened the leash from his expensive collar, on which was engraved: "Miss America from her British Ally. P. C. to J. P."

Feeling himself free the dog instantly turned and spraddled back to the Adored One's boudoir, where he was privileged to wallow among all the prettiest cushions. Such wallowing he much preferred to a

promenade with Simone or any one else save his worshipped Duchess.

As Simone rose from her stooping posture, she saw that Togo had ushered a man into the house. A second glance enabled her to recognize this man, and she was more amused than surprised to see that it was Captain Manners. Juliet had not asked her maid to deliver the secret letter, because it would be simpler for the man who opened the door to do so, and as the confidential mission was given to another, the Duchess had prudently refrained for mentioning it to Simone. The latter imagined her mistress must mentally have mislaid the fact that she herself had seen in the papers: Captain Manners' return on the *Britannia*, from France.

In any case, here he was, and all that was cynical in Simone laughed at the *contretemps*. He was certain to have asked for the Duke, as the Duchess was out. Would Togo, who had just let in Pavoya, venture to interrupt a *tête-à-tête*, by announcing that Her Grace's cousin had arrived? It occurred to Simone that the Japanese had not dared to turn away so important a person, but that, having let him in, he would find some way of excusing the Duke.

The situation was too dramatic to waste. The Frenchwoman pictured His Grace's expression, faced by his wife's cousin and loyal friend. She had wanted her mistress to marry Claremanagh, because it was distinguished to be the maid of a Duchess, but she

had liked Manners and received many a tip from him in days gone by. For that reason, and for others even more important, she must help Manners catch his cousin Juliet's husband and Lyda Pavoya together.

Thinking quickly, she tripped down the broad marble staircase which led to the great hall—a staircase that she was the one servant permitted to use. She had not passed the midway landing, however, when a second Japanese—a youth under the command of Togo—went hurrying toward the front door.

The electric bell was not audible to any one in the hall, but Simone guessed that a third caller had rung. In Togo's absence with Captain Manners, it was the duty of Huji to answer the door. The maid flew down the remaining steps, and was in time to hear the Japanese in embarrassed conversation with the latest arrival. This person was speaking broken English, and Huji, not as fluent in that tongue as Togo, could not understand.

"A Frenchman!" decided Simone. "*Mon Dieu*, it will be the messenger with the pearls!"

She stepped forward with a smile. "*Monsieur*," she said, "*Je suis Française, la femme de chambre de la Duchesse. Si je puis être utile—*"

The newcomer turned at the words, and beamed at sight of a compatriot. He was youngish, between thirty and forty, Simone thought. He was good-

looking, too; richly dark, as if he might be a child of the south, like herself. His eyes were handsome, and his small features well cut; so were his clothes. He had a neat, close-clipped moustache, and red lips which made his teeth look white as he gave smile for smile, though in reality they were slightly yellowed by constant cigarette smoking. Simone approved of him. He had the air of being a gentleman, and she was glad that fate had made them meet.

Naturally she knew of the Tsarina pearls, and that they were expected, after tiresome delays; for Juliet was both trustful and careless where Simone was concerned. But, save for this little comedy, she would not have met the messenger. Vaguely the maid understood that he was private secretary to some French financier in whose "care" the pearls had been left; and a secretary was far above a *femme de chambre* in the social scale. It was a pleasant accident which enabled her to earn his gratitude, and Simone had a sudden vision of being invited out to dine, or go to the theatre, as a reward. Who knew how it might end if she played just the right cards?

For a moment the two tossed "politenesses" to each other in their own beautiful language, the Nicoise striving to speak like a Parisienne. But there was no time to waste before the return of Togo, and after a few flowery sentences Simone came to business. "Monsieur has arrived on the *Britannia*, is it not?" she fluted.

This told, as she intended, that the "mission" was no secret from her; and the way was cleared for the messenger. He showed her a visiting-card, with which he had vainly tried to impress Huji. "Leon Defasquelle" was the name Simone read, and its owner volubly explained that he was awaited with impatience by the Duke of Claremanagh. "This Oriental," he went on, with a glance at the attentive yellow face, "informs me, if I understand aright, that I cannot see the Duke."

"Monsieur may have understood Huji. But it is Huji who does not understand the situation," smiled Simone. "His Grace the Duke is confined to the house with a cold. Otherwise he would doubtless have met Monsieur at the ship. As it was, he sent his own man. Was not Monsieur received by an Irishman named Nickson?"

Monsieur Defasquelle shook his head sadly. There must have been a mistake. He had hoped to find someone who would see him through the formalities of landing, but no one had appeared. Possibly this was due to the fact that his luggage had been placed under the Letter F instead of D, and so the Duke's man had missed him. Fortunately, through the influence of Mr. Henry Phayre (still engaged in the noble work of reconstructing devastated France), and that of the well-known New York banking house of Phayre, there had been no difficulty with the Customs. His—Defasquelle's

—mission had for obvious reasons been kept secret on shipboard, but the object he brought had been declared, and instead of being delayed at the dock, he had been aided by the authorities. It seemed strange now to meet obstacles at the journey's end!

"Be seated, Monsieur, for a moment," his countrywoman cooed. "I will go myself and tell His Grace that you have arrived. I am a privileged person in this house!"

Huji had understood not a word of the conversation in French, but seeing Simone start in the direction of the Duke's "study," he put himself in the woman's way. "Togo say Duke no see any peoples," he warned her in his best English.

"I will take the responsibility on myself," she said. "I knew the Duke long before Togo saw either of Their Graces."

With a slight push she passed the boy, and in her haste almost skated along the polished floor to the door next that of the Persian room. There she tapped sharply, without a second's hesitation, and waiting for an answer she could hear her heart knock in her breast.

For a long moment that felt longer there was no other sound. The silence behind the door seemed abnormal to her high-keyed nerves. But suddenly, as she was about to rap again, the door was flung open. The Duke stood on the threshold, his charming

brown face less charming than usual, because of a slight frown. At sight of Simone he showed surprise, his scowl having been prepared for Togo.

"What is it? Has your mistress come home?" he asked. The frown had faded; the voice was kind. But this change did not deceive Simone. She was sure that the Duke was in what he himself would call a "blue funk," and the fear she imagined brought back the last picture her mind had made of him. Quickly she saw the way to kill two birds with one stone.

"*Monsieur le Duc,*" she said in French. "The messenger has arrived from the *Britannia*, and is being detained in the hall by the Japanese. He is very vexed and surprised. I took it on myself to tell Your Grace, as I think this is a man who would go away in anger; and that would be a pity."

Claremanagh flushed. Simone read his confusion. Pavoya was not to be seen, but she was in the room, hidden somewhere; there was no doubt of that; either behind the big Spanish screen, or in the window recess covered by velvet curtains. If Simone had not learned to control her features she would have laughed. She knew that the wretched young man must be thinking, "What shall I do? If I go outside this room to meet Defasquelle, someone may walk in and find Pavoya. Perhaps it may be a plot of my wife's, who has come back and seen Pavoya! Yet if I receive Defasquelle here, Pavoya will have to re-

main hidden, since there will be no chance for her to escape."

It was a case of the frying pan and the fire, and to know which was which seemed a "toss up". However, the Duke made the best of things as they were, and decided quickly. "Of course I'll see this gentleman," he said in rather a loud tone. "Have him sent here at once."

"*Bien, Monsieur le Duc!*" agreed Simone; then added instantly, "And the Capitaine Manners? Is he to be kept waiting?"

"Good Lord!" exploded Claremanagh. "Is *he* here, too?"

"He has been here some time," the maid had begun to explain when Togo appeared, his eye bright with rage. This woman had upset his careful arrangements! He knew that she had done it to make mischief. But now there was no circumventing her. He had heard the whole story from Huji, and an elaborate plan to keep Captain Manners contented in the Persian room was a burst bubble. Meekly Togo took orders from the Duke to bring both visitors to him, Captain Manners first, because he was a relative, and not more than five minutes later, Monsieur Defasquelle.

"Does His Grace wish me to make his excuses to the messenger?" asked Simone, as Togo trotted off to the Persian room.

"Yes, go," said the Duke, no doubt anxious for an

instant with the hidden one; and the maid hurried back to Defasquelle. In order to ingratiate herself, rather than exonerate her mistress's husband, she threw all her charm into the explanation. In five minutes—no more!—His Grace would receive Monsieur. Meanwhile, was there any information, any aid, she could give—she who had known New York for years? By the time Togo appeared to conduct the messenger, Defasquelle and Simone had discovered that they were both of the south; he, no farther from Nice than Marseilles. It was when the very invitation she had wished for hovered on the Frenchman's lips that the Japanese intervened, and Simone hated Togo more violently than before.

CHAPTER VI

BEHIND THE BOOKSHELF

“CAPTAIN MANNERS, this is Monsieur Defasquelle, private secretary to Monsieur Mayen, of whom you have heard me speak,” Claremanagh introduced the two men, as the messenger came in. He shook Defasquelle’s hand and gave him one of the delightful smiles which helped to make him popular with all types and classes.

Jack tried not to hear what Juliet’s husband and the Frenchman said to each other. Not that there was any special reason why he shouldn’t hear, for he’d heard Pat groan over the pawned pearls till he was sick of the subject; and he had been drawn into the business of trying to get them for Juliet after Claremanagh left France. But his part in the affair was ended, and he felt that Pat would rather be alone with Defasquelle; that he had been asked to make a third on the scene entirely through politeness. Besides, he was grimly conscious that the three men were not the only persons present. He was as sure as Simone had been that Lyda Pavoya listened from behind the Spanish screen, or the half-drawn green velvet curtains. He was angry for Juliet’s sake that

the woman should be in the house, and disgusted that she should be hidden. Never had he come so near disliking Pat, even on the day when Juliet broke the news of her engagement. But to his own annoyance, he could not dislike him whole-heartedly. He even found himself sneakingly half-sorry for the fellow. Wondering why this should be, he was roused from his thoughts by the raised voice of Defasquelle.

"But I must beg, *Monsieur le Duc*, that you open the box in my presence and verify the contents!" he exclaimed.

"I see how you feel, but I can't do that, and it's not necessary," returned Pat.

Jack Manners had seated himself on the club-fender that guarded the fine fireplace. He had taken an illustrated paper to occupy eyes and hands, but glanced up and saw on the table between Claremanagh and Defasquelle a box neatly packed in some waterproof-looking material, sealed with five fat crimson seals.

"It would spoil all the fun if I broke those seals," Pat went on, in a more human tone. "My wife must be the first to open the thing, and see the pearls. I'm extremely sorry she's out. But it can't be helped. If you care to wait——"

"When will Madame the Duchess return?" Defasquelle enquired.

"That's more than I know. Not till late, I'm afraid."

"I have made an engagement in a half hour from now," regretted the Frenchman, taking out his watch. "It is an appointment that cannot be put off, as the person is not free to change from one time to another. Monsieur, I urge you to open the box. It is only fair to the Purser of the *Britannia*, who kept it in his safe. It is only fair to me——"

Claremanagh laughed. "Oh, don't bother about *that* side of it! Those seals alone are a proof that the packet hasn't been tampered with since it left Mayen's hands. You're his secretary, Monsieur Defasquelle, and he trusts you completely, or he wouldn't have chosen you, above any one else, as his messenger. But I don't suppose he would take that seal ring I gave him off his finger to lend it even to you. He volunteered the promise to me that it should never leave his hand. In fact, when I pledged the pearls to him for two hundred thousand francs, it was he who suggested fastening them up in a box sealed with my own particular, private seal."

"You are right so far, *Monsieur le Duc*," admitted Defasquelle. "My employer has been true to his agreement. For one thing, the ring you had made for him with the facsimile of your seal happens to be rather small. I do not think he could remove it from his finger if he wished without having it sawed off by a jeweller."

"Very well, then!" said Pat. "There you are!"

"But *I* am not there," argued the Frenchman,

unfamiliar with English idioms. "Seals can be taken off and fastened on again, I have heard, without the change leaving a trace. I am certain these are intact. But, putting aside myself and the Pursuer, Monsieur would not——"

"Rot, my dear fellow!" cut in the Duke. "I trust Mayen as I trust myself. Of course, I know—we all three know—the pearls are inside that box. *You* say you can't wait for my wife to come home. *I* say the seals shan't be broken by any hand but hers. Let's be sensible! Manners, come here, won't you, and reassure Monsier Defasquelle by examining these seals!" He snatched the box up from the table, and held it out to Jack. "You've got sharp eyes. I leave it to you. Can't you swear that those five red blobs have never been tampered with, even by the smartest expert alive?"

Reluctantly Jack came forward, and accepting the box, closely examined the seals. "I think I'd be prepared to swear that," he said. "All the same, Monsieur Defasquelle is right, in my opinion. You owe it to him—to everyone concerned, including the company who've insured the pearls—to open the box before you let it go out of your sight."

"You're no true friend of Juliet's, to give me such advice," Pat taunted him. "And I won't take it. That's flat. While as for the seals, look there!" As he retrieved the package, he nodded at a ring on the least finger of his right hand.

Both men's eyes went to it; Defasquelle's to note, perhaps, how precisely the raised design of the wax resembled the sunken design on the gold. But there was a different thought in Jack Manners' mind. He remembered what Juliet had written him about this ring. What had happened between her and Pat? was the question that flashed through his head. A few hours ago she had sealed her "secret letter" with her husband's ring, after some dispute concerning it. And now, here it was on Pat's finger again!

Claremanagh, unconscious of Jack's disparaging reflections, began to regain something like his old gaiety of manner. "Are you satisfied, Monsieur?" he asked. Then, seeing that Defasquelle screwed up his brilliant eyes in a near-sighted way, the Duke flung the box on the table, and pulled off the ring.

"Have a good look at it," he said, almost forcing it into the Frenchman's hand. "There's a safe in the wall of this room, made by my dead father-in-law, to keep such things as he didn't care to send to the bank. My wife and I are the only people alive who have keys to it, or know the combination. Besides, my own man is the one servant allowed in this room. So you see, Jack, I don't need to keep the box 'in sight' after Monsieur Defasquelle goes."

As he spoke, he walked toward an alcove at the left of the fireplace. It was fitted with bookshelves; and as Manners' eyes followed Claremanagh he

remembered the secret of Silas Phayre's safe. Part of the top shelf had to be pulled out from the wall (after touching a spring) and then pushed up. Thus a small steel door was revealed, and could be unlocked only after a certain combination of letters had been made. Jack had not thought of the safe in years, or glanced in its direction on entering the room; but now, to his surprise, he saw that the book-shelf had already been pushed up, and the safe-door not only revealed, but opened.

Claremanagh's back was turned to him, and he could not see by a change of face whether Pat was vexed at his own forgetfulness, or indifferent. But Jack remembered the hidden fourth person in the room, and instinct told him that the safe had not been opened in readiness for the pearls. There had been some other motive. Claremanagh and the Polish woman had been interrupted in their *tête-à-tête*, and it would be characteristic of Pat if an unexpected rap on the door had caught him unawares. Could he have been in the act of giving Pavoya a jewel from the safe when he had been forced to answer a knock?

Luckily, no such suspicion could be in the Frenchman's head, for he had not seen Pavoya slip into the house. Jack glanced at him, and saw that he had laid the Duke's seal ring on the table beside the sealed packet. He was looking at the safe, but showed no surprise at finding it open. For him, it had been prepared to receive the pearls.

“There’s a good little hidie-hole!” said Pat. “Now I’ll sign the receipt, Monsieur, and you may go to your engagement with a light heart.” He went back to the table, took the box, and tossed it into the aperture in the wall. Then he closed the steel door, did something to it which the eyes of neither man could follow, and pulled down the concealing bookshelf.

A moment later he was scrawling “Claremanagh” on the paper which Defasquelle rather sulkily put into his hand.

CHAPTER VII

WHAT JULIET TOLD JACK

AT FIVE minutes before five o'clock Jack Manners entered the Palm Room of the Hotel Lorne. This room adjoined the restaurant, and was crowded with small tables lit by pink-shaded electric candles. The Lorne was a good hotel, but too stodgily respectable to be amusing. As there was no band at meal times or tea time, its clients were mostly unmodern creatures with a strange preference for peace and quiet.

It was well that Jack had arrived before the hour fixed, for at five precisely Juliet appeared. He had already engaged a table in a secluded corner half screened by drooping, feather-like branches; but his eyes were on the door, and he sprang up as the tall, girlish figure drifted in between two palms.

At sight of his boyhood's love, his heart gave a bound. How lovely she was in her sheathlike grey dress, with dangling silvery things, like clouds of dawn filming a pale sunrise sky! Her hat was simple yet quaint, pushing forward her bright hair, and making her face look young as a child's—pathetically young. Yes, "pathetic" was the word, Jack thought

as he went to meet her, and she came hastening to him as to a haven. And "pathetic" was a new word in connection with Juliet Phayre! She had been proud, fantastic, absurd, charming, obstinate, unaccountable, and a hundred other things, but never pathetic. Manners wondered if it could be the dip of her odd hat-brim which gave her that look of transparent pallor, and the blue shadows under her big eyes.

There were not many people in the room, as tea at the Lorne was far from a fashionable function. Those who were there seemed absorbed, in a tired, provincial-shoppers' way, in the muffin and tea business. Still, Juliet was too tall and beautiful not to be conspicuous even if unrecognized, and a few weeks ago no Sunday Supplement had been complete without her photograph. The two could do no more than gaze deep, eyes in eyes, for an instant, as they met near the door, and squeeze instead of shaking hands; but all prudence was Jack's. He saw by Juliet's face that the tea-drinkers were of no more importance to her than the chairs they sat in, and he could have kissed the face turned up affectionately to his—if he would. But he would not, and he did not even speak until he had her seated at their palm-screened table.

"Oh, Jack, it's great to see you!" Juliet said, when a too-attentive waiter had finished taking their order. Tears suddenly welled to her eyes. She dived into a

gorgeous gold mesh bag for a handkerchief, which was not there. "Must be lost!" she sniffed. Hastily Jack passed his across the table, and had a heart-piercing impression that he had lived through this scene before, in happier days. But yes, of course! Often, when he was a big boy and she was a little girl, she had come to him for consolation. And she had always lost her "hanky!" It was then, when he was about sixteen, and she eleven, that he had first begun to love her, with a protecting love that had changed but never waned as the years passed. Now she belonged to another man. Yet she still called to him, across the gulf marriage had made, for help and comfort! Jack Manners wondered what had happened to his red blood, that the pain he suffered was not more acute.

"I'm too sorry for the child to think of myself just now," he diagnosed his feelings, with the picture of Pavoya in his mind. "The reaction will come by and by."

Juliet began at once to pour out her woes, forgetting to ask what had happened during Jack's visit to the house—what her husband had said, or whether the pearls had come.

"Pat doesn't love me," she broke out. "That's why I'm miserable. I don't know how to live. And I wouldn't have believed it if any one had told me—except himself."

"You don't mean that Claremanagh says——"

Jack began to blunder; but Juliet cut him short. "Not in *words*, of course. But I found a letter from that devil, Pavoya. It began, 'My Best and Dearest Friend'. Isn't that the same thing as telling me? The woman wouldn't write to him like that if he didn't encourage her."

Jack longed to comfort the girl; but after what he had seen, he was at a loss for consoling words. "How did you happen to find the letter?" he temporized.

"Why, it had to do with the fuss about Pat's seal ring," the girl confessed. "But first, I'd better explain that when I was being married, I made firm resolutions never to mention the name of Pavoya to Pat. Emmy West almost *dared* me to! And that alone was enough to show me it would be a silly mistake. But one night after we'd come to New York and were settling down happily, we had an exciting, intimate sort of talk about our pasts. It was a *beautiful* talk! And I felt so sure of Pat, I just couldn't resist asking if he'd ever loved Pavoya. He swore he hadn't; he'd only admired her a lot, and flirted a little. It was nothing at all beside what he felt for *me*. He was so dear that I burst out about how nasty Emmy West and other people had been—how unhappy they'd made me, more than once. Pat said '*Damn* Emmy West and all the cats!' I *loved* that! And while the mood was on, I asked if he were willing to promise he'd not see Pavoya in New York.

“The minute those words were spoken, I saw a change in Pat. He said he couldn’t make such a promise. There might be circumstances which would force him to see her. He wouldn’t call on her, though. I had to be satisfied with that, and I was—*almost*, till one day when I’d teased him to lend me his seal ring. It’s supposed to bring luck, you know. So I thought I’d try it, for bridge. I had to wear it on my thumb; it’s too big for my fingers. I was playing that afternoon at Nancy Van Esten’s. I had a Frenchwoman for a partner. I’d never met her before. Perhaps you knew her in Paris? A Comtesse de Saintville: her husband is on some mission here. She’s a very impulsive woman—neurotic, I should think. I didn’t feel drawn to her, because I’d heard she was a great pal of Lyda Pavoya’s: that they went about together a lot. Suddenly she noticed the ring. She squeaked, ‘Why, I *know* that eye! I saw it on a letter the other day.’ Then she shut up and turned red. I could see her colour through *inches* of powder! Of course, I guessed where she’d seen the letter. And there was only one person who could have sent it. Maybe I turned red, too. But I pretended to take no interest, and Nancy Van Esten said ‘*Do let’s play bridge!*’

“I went home perfectly wretched. Pat thought I was ill. I didn’t contradict him. I hadn’t made up my mind what to do. But one thing I did—I kept the ring. Day before yesterday he asked me

for it. I knew what that meant! He wanted to write to *her* again—perhaps had a letter to answer. I showed quite plainly that I hated giving up the ring. But he didn't care. He would have it. The only sort of 'concession' he made was to say he'd give it back next day—after he'd finished a batch of correspondence. Well, the next day came, and he didn't give the ring back, though I saw he wasn't wearing it. You know how forgetful and careless he often is! I was sure he'd left the ring where he sealed his letters. He'd promised I should have it again. I suppose I had a right to *take* it, hadn't I?"

Juliet paused, her eyes dry now, challenging Jack. But he did not speak, and she hurried on to defend herself. "I *felt* I had the right," she persisted, without conviction. "So yesterday I went into the room that used to be Dad's den. It's Pat's den now. He wasn't in——"

"Did you think he would be?"

"No-o. As a matter of fact, he'd gone to the bank. You know he works there. He's quite keen. He'd been late about getting off, so he'd started in a hurry. His desk wasn't locked. I don't know whether he ever locks it, because I never tried the drawers before. Anyhow, in the top drawer a lot of letters were tumbled in—letters he'd received, and letters he'd written—not in envelopes yet. All sorts of things were there in disorder—fountain pens, sealing wax, and—*the ring!* It was on an open letter that

lay face up, a letter with a purple monogram of L. P. A perfume came up from the paper—a queer perfume, and the writing—in purple ink—was queer, too. I saw the beginning I told you about: ‘My Best and Dearest Friend’—in French. Oh, Jack, I thought I should have died. I almost wish I had!”

“Nonsense!” Jack scouted her grief. “If the letter had had anything in it Pat was ashamed to have you see, you may be sure even he wouldn’t have been so careless.”

“It wasn’t exactly carelessness made him leave it,” Juliet said, sadly. “It was trust in me. He didn’t dream that I—would do such a thing as read a letter of his. And I didn’t read it. I didn’t read another word, Jack. One side of me wanted to, horribly. The other side was disgusted at the idea—the stronger side, it turned out.”

“Good girl!” cried Jack.

“Yes, I do think I was a saint. But virtue never has any reward except its own. I left the ring and the letter. But I felt half dead. I decided things couldn’t go on as they were. I meant to speak to Pat when he came home.”

“And did you?”

“No, because he was ill—had a bad headache—the beginning of a cold. Or else he was pretending. I can’t trust him now! But he looked pale and odd, so I nobly left him alone till this morning. Then I went to the study, and asked him to keep his promise

about the ring. He pulled open the drawer. There it was on the letter, as I saw it yesterday. That gave me my chance. I said, 'Pavoya has been writing to you. I see her monogram.' And I pretended to read, 'My Best and Dearest Friend', for the first time."

"By George!" exclaimed Jack, as Juliet stopped for breath.

"By George, indeed!" she echoed. "Pat accused me of being suspicious. I accused him of being untrue. We had a *scene*! I never thought I could say such things to Pat as I said. The way he took them made me worse. He just looked at me in silence, with his mouth shut like a steel trap. I suppose he hates me now. If he hadn't deserved every word I said, I should deserve to be hated for saying them. If he'd *loved* me, he would have boxed my ears! I half expected he would. But seeing him stand like a graven image, I turned to leave the room. He opened the door for me to go out, and *handed me the ring*."

"You took it!"

"I had to, or fling it in his face. I went straight off and wrote that letter to you, which I sealed with the ring. Then I sent it back to him by Old Nick. I haven't seen Pat, of course, since he shut the door on me. And I don't know how we are going to behave to each other when we meet next."

"You will behave as if nothing had happened, of course," Jack said with decision.

"That's your advice?"

"Certainly. And nothing *has* really happened, so far as you know. You have no proof that Claremanagh has broken his word about calling on Pavoya. And you've seen no letter from him to her——"

"Someone else saw his seal!"

"The most innocent words may have been under it. And you can't blame a man if a woman chooses to address him as her 'dearest friend'. At least you've no right to do so."

"Don't you think I have? That's because you're a man, always ready to defend another man. And you don't understand women."

"Good heavens, I don't claim to! And I do *not* defend Claremanagh. I merely say, give him the benefit of the doubt. Only men and women in melodrama refuse to hear any defense from the suspected one. You asked for my advice. There it is, my child, whether it pleases you or not."

"Well, if you want me to be as cool and reasonable as you are, you've got to stand by me, and see me through."

"I'm neither cool nor reasonable where you're concerned, Juliet. But you know I'll stand by you."

"You mean, you'll not go to Long Island? You'll stay in New York, and be our guest?"

"I'll not go to Long Island—at present. I'll stay in New York. But I *won't* be your guest."

"You're cruel, Jack! You're selfish!" Juliet cried, as she had often unjustly cried before.

"You know better," he said. "It is the outsider who sees the game. I ought to see it—if I'm to help. And I *wouldn't* be an outsider if I were your guest. I've taken rooms at the Hotel Tarascon, only one street away from your house and Pat's."

Juliet was silent for a moment. She had a hideous fear that, in her anger, she had flung *Her* house, *Her* money, *Her* everything, at Claremanagh's stone pale face.

CHAPTER VIII

JULIET BREAKS THE SEALS

AT SIX forty-two the Duchess of Claremanagh descended from a plebeian taxicab in front of her pretentious home. She had sent away her own car, before going to the Lorne, and though there was no wrong in her secret, she was weighed down by a sense of guilt as she went to her room. This annoyed her, because the one guilty person in the house was Pat!

She had heard, toward the end of her conversation with Jack, that the pearls had come while he was with the Duke; but the girl was too wretched to care. How did she know that the story about Monsieur Mayen was not a "fake"? It was quite possible that Pavoya had had the pearls for months, and had only now given them up, under cover of Mayen's name, and his messenger on the *Britannia*. Juliet felt as Emmy West had expected her to feel: She hated the pearls! Whatever the truth was, she could take no pleasure in wearing them. All the same, she *would* wear them, to show curiosity-mongers that they were not in Lyda Pavoya's hands. She would wear them this very night.

She and Claremanagh were engaged to dine at the Van Estens', and he had insisted in the morning that he would be well enough to go. Now, for all she could tell, he might have changed his mind, and 'phoned that his cold would keep him at home. That excuse should not affect *her*, however. If he did not bring or send the pearls to her room, Simone should take him a note. In this, Juliet would say, not that Jack had told her, but that she "*supposed* the messenger had arrived," and she would ask for the pearls to wear at Nancy's dinner party—ask for them not as a favour, but because of the right she had, as Duchess of Claremanagh.

"Madame is very late!" were Simone's first words as Juliet flung open her bedroom door. "I began to be anxious."

Juliet glanced at her wrist-watch and a French clock on the mantel. It was true, she *was* late! She had a new gown which there had been no time to try, and dinner was at eight. The girl's nerves, tensely strained all day, began to get out of control. She was "jumpy" and cross as Simone unfastened the many little hidden hooks and tiny lace buttonholes of the "dawn-cloud" dress. Simone's hands were cold as ice, she complained. She hoped Simone wasn't "sickening for something!" Then, it seemed that the quaint grey hat had spoiled her hair, which usually remained in perfect order throughout the day. It had to be let down; and being immensely

long and thick, would take twenty minutes to rearrange. Never, *never* had Simone been so awkward! Her fingers were all thumbs!

For a few moments, in her need of haste and her nervous agitation, Juliet forgot the crying question of the pearls. But a knock at the door which separated Pat's room from hers set every pulse a-throb. *He had come, of his own accord!*

The blood rushed to her cheeks, and as she turned to the opening door, she looked gloriously beautiful. Her eyes met Claremanagh's with the desperate appeal of a loving, tortured soul, and he was disarmed.

"Could you let Simone go for a few minutes?" he asked. "I should like to speak to you alone."

A few seconds ago Juliet had been fuming because every instant counted. But suddenly time ceased to be of importance. She didn't care how late she might be for Nancy's dinner. She didn't care if she were too late to go at all!

Simone, who knew that things were not as they should be, expected her mistress coldly to refuse the Duke. She was intensely surprised to be sent away and told not to return for fifteen minutes. Sensitively jealous, the maid resented being sent out of the room for *ce traître*, as she mentally called Claremanagh. What a different scene there would be between husband and wife if she had betrayed to the Duchess the secret of the afternoon! To do so would satisfy her love of drama, and her pique against the Duke; but

Simone knew too well "which side her bread was buttered." For one thing, the Duchess would not hear such a tale from a servant, even her trusted maid. The Duke might be sent "packing" by the heiress, but so would Simone! And for another thing, there must be no possible suspicion when the "Whisperer" of the *Inner Circle* whispered next, as to where the whisper had started. It would not do for Simone to know that Lyda Pavoya had called on the Duke of Claremanagh in his American wife's absence.

The instant the Frenchwoman was out of the room, Pat came close to Juliet. He was dressed for dinner, all but coat and waistcoat, and Juliet adored him thus, in his glittering white expanse of evening shirt. She had often told him so.

"You were not very kind to me this morning," he said, looking down at her, his face graver than she had ever seen it before this day. "I may as well tell you I was a good deal hurt, and angry, too—though I haven't deserved too well of you, perhaps. But to see you as you are now makes me forget everything, except that we've been dear lovers, and that you're the most beautiful girl on earth—*my* girl! You look just as you looked that evening at Harridge's, a million miles away, in old London—the night before our wedding when I came in suddenly, and you'd been washing your hair. Do you still hate your poor Romeo, *Giullietta mia*, or do you feel like forgetting, too, and beginning all over again?"

"I never hated you—not for a minute!" cried Juliet. "I thought you hated *me!*"

"Then you were jolly well mistaken," said Pat.

They gazed at each other like two fencers, for a moment; then Juliet sprang up, and held out her arms. He clasped her, and kissed her hair, her face, her bare white neck. Something he held in his hand, out of her sight behind his back, fell to the floor. She started at the sound, and he let her go, laughing like his old self.

"'History repeats!'" he exclaimed. "Do you remember the little box I brought you, with its blobby seals? Well, I have another sealed box for you to-night. You're to open it as you opened that one, and you will find the same thing inside. Only, it will be the same thing with a difference."

He picked up the packet from the floor, and handed it to Juliet with a flourish. "*Voilà, Madame! Les plus belles choses, pour la plus belle dame.*"

"The pearls!" Juliet breathed.

"The pearls!" echoed Pat.

The girl was thrilled. How could she have hated the things so angrily an hour ago? Her whole mood concerning them and concerning life had changed under Pat's kisses. She was going to *love* his pearls for his sake, and the sake of their own romance!

"Why, the seals haven't been broken!" she exclaimed, as she took the box.

"No, I was determined you and you alone should do the breaking."

"But—didn't the messenger insist?"

"He did. Two can play at that game, though!"

"What about the receipt? I should have thought he'd object——"

"'Object' is a mild word. I convinced him in the end, however—if not that I was right, anyhow that I meant to have my own way. Darling, this is a happy moment for me—though I didn't expect to be happy to-night. Break the seals. Open the box. And I shall know by your eyes what you think of its contents."

With trembling fingers Juliet obeyed. Each seal was so perfect, it seemed a shame to shatter the delicate eye in crimson wax. Laughing, she remarked that it was clear no thief had touched the box. Pat agreed, and took from her the waterproof wrapping as she peeled it off. Within was a wooden box, with a sliding lid, such as French jewellers use. Claremanagh had bought it himself, at Mayen's request, he explained to Juliet; and the seal (made also by his ring) which held the cover in place had been pressed by his hand in the presence of his friend, the "super money-lender."

"By Jove, I'm proud of it!" he exclaimed. "It's a work of art. I'd forgotten how good it was. The best seal I've ever done, and I've called myself an expert—a Genie of the ring!"

It needed a pair of scissors to loosen the wax from the wood. Then Juliet slipped off the lid, and took from the box something wrapped in a handkerchief of fine Irish linen. "You'll find my monogram on that rag," said Pat, apparently enjoying himself. "Mayen would make me wrap the case with the pearls in something that belonged to me—something that couldn't be copied easily by a thief. My hair wasn't quite long enough to do up a parcel in, and this was the only other thing we could think of!"

While he gaily explained, Juliet slowly—tantalizing herself—unwound the linen folds. So doing, she smelt a faint fragrance of tobacco—Pat's special tobacco which left its odour on all his clothes. It had seemed exquisitely exciting to the girl when she was engaged to Claremanagh, and it was more so than ever to-night, when they were having this heavenly reconciliation—a reconciliation partly due to Jack's advice and his defence of the Duke. But it was odd that the scent should have lasted all these months!

Juliet exclaimed over this to Pat, but he accounted for it by reminding her how closely the handkerchief had been shut up in the box.

At last she was looking at the jewel-case which had once belonged to the love-sick Tsarina! It was of white velvet, creamy now with age, and stamped with crowns in gold, pathetically and appropriately dimmed. The catch was curious and beautiful: a big *cabocho*n ruby shaped like a heart. Juliet

pushed it, and lifted the satin lid. There, on the cushion, lay the long rope of pearls curled up like a snake, with the curious diamond clasp for its head.

The girl had expected to cry out in amazed admiration at sight of the wonderful thing—"Claremanagh's ewe lamb." She had expected to be literally dazzled. But instead, she suffered a shock of disappointment.

With all the will in the world to be pleased and grateful, she was dumb. She could think of nothing to say; and she tingled with embarrassment under her husband's eyes.

"Well, darling," he said, after a few seconds of waiting. "Don't the poor pearls come up to your hopes?"

"Oh, yes!" she forced herself to answer. "Aren't they *big*? Aren't they *blue*? I never saw any so-called 'blue pearls' so really blue as these."

"All the same, you are disappointed," Pat judged, his eyes on her face. "Don't you think by this time I know your tones and your expressions? Out with it, Jule! Bless you, *I* shan't be hurt. I didn't make the pearls, you know. And you're a spoiled pet of fortune, brought up from your babyhood to play with better toys than these. You could have had pearls as big as plums, in a rope to your feet, if you'd wanted 'em. Only your taste was too good. What's the matter with these baubles?"

"Why," the girl hesitated, "if I must say what I think you know I *am* supposed to be a bit of an ex-

pert, in my little amateur way), it seems to me these pearls aren't as lustrous as they ought to be. Perhaps they're 'sick'. They may need sea-water, or something. Yet they haven't the symptoms of 'dying' pearls. They haven't lost their colour. They've got almost too much—to look *real*."

"They're real enough!"

"Of course they *must* be. And the clasp is charming, isn't it? An eye made of a blue sapphire, set in white diamonds, rimmed with tiny black ones; an eye like the design of your seal, except that this one looks to the right, and——"

"To the *right*!" Pat caught the words from her mouth. "Impossible!"

Juliet stared. "But it does. You may see for yourself."

"Good God!" There was horror in his voice.

Juliet could not understand. This scene began to feel like a queer dream. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"Give me the thing!"

She handed him the rope.

He glared at the clasp as if the diamond and sapphire eye were a miniature head of Medusa. Then he turned to her with a dazed expression, still in silence.

"You frighten me," she faltered.

"You—you say you're an expert in pearls," he said. "How can you tell real ones from false?"

“One very simple way is to touch them to the tip of the tongue,” Juliet explained, bewildered. “Real pearls are always cold. False ones can be warmish. Besides, the surface feels different. And even if the weight is right——”

“Test these,” Pat said.

The girl took back the gleaming blue rope, and lifted the largest pearls to her lips.

“They are—false,” she gasped, after an instant’s pause.

“You are sure?”

“Yes. I am sure.”

CHAPTER IX

THE EYE THAT LOOKED TO THE RIGHT

THE two stared at each other in silence, and both were pale.

Juliet's mind was confused. "The pearls false!" She tried to hammer the words into her brain, and understand fully what the thing would mean for her and Pat. She thought of Louis Mayen, the "super money-lender," who had kept the pearls for months, and supposed that Claremanagh also must be thinking of him.

"What a treacherous, horrible man!" she broke out, at last. The Duke stared, almost stupidly—if he could be stupid.

"*Who* is treacherous—horrible?" he stammered.

"Why, your friend Mayen, of course!" she explained. "My poor Pat!"

Comprehension dawned in Claremanagh's eyes. "Oh, Mayen had nothing to do with this!" he assured her.

"Who else, then?" Juliet persisted. "The purser on the ship, who had the box in his safe, coming over? But *he* didn't have the seal. Mayen had it. He—or his messenger could——"

“Put that idea out of your head, my darling,” urged Claremanagh. “Mayen had the seal, and of course it’s on the cards that Defasquelle, his messenger, might have stolen it or had an imitation one made. But neither of them had the——”

Abruptly the Duke stopped. He had been talking fast and eagerly, and he pulled himself up so short that it was as if he stumbled. Juliet had been examining the quaint clasp of the false pearls, which she still had in her hand, but that shocked pause brought her eyes to her husband’s face. It had been pale and strained, but now there was a look upon it of physical suffering.

“You’ve thought of the one who did it!” she cried. “Someone you care for!”

By an intense effort Claremanagh seemed to withdraw all expression from his face. It became dull, like a handsome mask. “I wish I *had* thought of any one,” he said. “No such luck.”

Juliet had pitied him unselfishly at first, for after all the pearls were his, not hers, and the loss—sentimental and material—would be very great if the Tsarina’s pearls were gone. But his look, his changed tone, and the cloud that seemed to rise between them like a mist roused her vague resentment. She felt as if she had tried to comfort him and he had pushed her away.

“Pat!” she exclaimed, sharply. “It’s no use your trying to put me off. You *have* thought who

changed the pearls—or anyhow, of a person who *might* have done it. You've simply got to tell me. I have a right to know."

"My dear child," he protested. "You do spring to the wildest conclusions!"

Juliet's anger rose. "The whole thing is wild. Only wild conclusions are of any use. If you don't want me to try and help you, I won't. But I can't prevent myself from seeing one thing that perhaps you don't see yet. If the real thief isn't soon found, and this story gets out, there will be some horrid gossip about *you*."

Claremanagh flushed scarlet. "I do see," he said. "At least, I see what you're hinting at. If I purloin my own pearls, and secretly sell them, while getting credit at the same time for giving them to my wife, I bring off a very neat coup. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The thing sounded so crudely villainous when put into words that Juliet was ashamed. But there was a fierce light in the eyes which until to-day had never looked at her except in love—or seeming love. Juliet would not let her husband fancy for an instant that he had made her flinch. "Yes, that's what I mean," she answered. "One's dear friends are capable of any insinuation."

"And even those dearer and nearer than friends!" Pat flung at her. "Oh, I realize that I'm the classic target. A poor Irish peer—the poorest of the lot!—

who dares to marry America's richest girl. No beastly trick too vile to believe of him! Of course a blighter like that couldn't have married the girl for love."

To hear the words spoken, even in bitterest sarcasm, was like the prick of a knife. Juliet had pushed them out of her own mind so often that it was sharpest anguish to have them thrust into it by Pat's adored lips. If he loved her, she could not see how it was possible for him to speak like that! In thinking this, she pitied herself desperately, and forgot her own words which had lashed him to retaliation. She forgot, too, how that very morning *her* lips had flung this very taunt. She had shown him sharply how much her own she considered her fortune, her house, and everything he shared as her husband.

It seemed to her that now he was inadvertently confessing, rather than sneering at possible accusers. Juliet defended her own attractions pitifully, yet there was nothing pitiful in her look. She loomed tall and aggressive, and cruelly beautiful, with blazing eyes and cheeks.

"A great many men have told me they loved me, and that no one could *help* loving me for myself, but I never believed any of them till I met you; and then I was a conceited fool to think you could care for me after Lyda Pavoya."

Pat started as if she had boxed his ears: and Juliet,

too, was surprised. She had not meant to say that. The thing had said itself. For an instant his eyes flamed. Then their fire died out, and left them cold. He looked disgusted. "I told you once that I had never loved Mademoiselle Pavoya," he said. "One isn't used to having one's word doubted. It's rather humiliating to have it happen with one's own wife. But putting that aside, why not keep to the point? Why bring up the lady's name when we are discussing quite a different affair—the affair of these pearls?"

Out of Claremanagh's coldness a demon was born, and flew straight to Juliet's heart. For an instant she lost all sense of her own love for her husband. She hated him and wished to hurt him as much as she could, because it seemed that he had gone out of his way to hurt her. She tingled all over with indignant humiliation. It was as if Pat had said, "I happen to be your husband, but you are only a commoner with no traditions of fine breeding behind you, while I am a man whose ancestors might have had yours for servants. No wonder you have no intuitive idea of decent decorum."

"Is it a different affair?" she cried. "Or is it one single affair—the affair of Lyda Pavoya and your pearls?"

Again the words had spoken themselves, but a flare of enlightenment came with them. Surely something had *made* her speak. Something which *knew*

what she hadn't thought of till this moment: that Lyda Pavoya had taken the pearls.

How she could possibly have got them, if they had ever been in Louis Mayen's keeping, Juliet could not see. But she had them—she had them! That was clear: and the fact would account for Pat's sudden breaking off of a sentence. He had begun to defend Mayen and Defasquelle. "But neither one of them had the——" he had said, and stopped short, with an awful look on his face—the look of seeing something which no one else must be allowed to see. *What* thing was there that Mayen and his messenger had not, which another person might have had? A thing which would make theft possible? A person who must be protected at any price?

Juliet could not guess yet what the thing might be, but the second guess was all too easy.

This time the Duke showed no sign of surprise, therefore he was *not* surprised. He merely looked more disgusted than before, which made his lack of love for his wife and his wish to defend the Polish dancer more evident to Juliet's racked mind.

"When I gave you my word about not loving Mademoiselle Pavoya I gave it also about the pearls," Claremanagh said. "I told you then that she had never had them. I can only repeat the statement, since you seem to have forgotten."

"I have forgotten nothing!" cried Juliet. "It's a man's code of honour, I suppose, to defend a

woman, no matter how. But if that's *not* so—if you don't care enough for Lyda Pavoya to lie for her to your wife, I'd like to know how you'll answer this question: Do you swear that you don't suspect her of somehow stealing the real pearls, and putting imitation ones in their place?"

Claremanagh's face changed. He had been frankly though coldly furious. Now he looked stricken. "I would lie for no one on earth, except for you, and then only to save your life," he said. "It's an insult from you to me to ask that I should swear such a thing."

"Very well, then, your simple word is enough," said Juliet. "Give it that you don't think Pavoya has the pearls."

Claremanagh was silent, his eyes upon her. And in that silence, short as it was, Juliet heard a tiny voice speak. It whispered: "The thing Pavoya had, which the other didn't have, was a *copy*. *She had a copy of the pearls.*"

"I could not believe such a thing," the Duke answered. "I have known Mademoiselle Pavoya for years. She is a good woman."

Juliet laughed, and laughing flung the false pearls on the floor. "'A good woman!' You *have* original ideas! I've heard a lot of things about her from a lot of people, but never that before."

"Because only malicious speeches are amusing, they are the ones 'a lot of people'—the lot we know—mostly make."

“Pooh!” sneered Juliet. “I see the whole thing now—except how she got the real pearls. But this imitation rope she *had*. You can’t face me, and say she hadn’t.”

“I’ll say nothing more on the subject while you’re in this mood,” returned Claremanagh.

“All right, if you think prevarication more honourable than lying straight out,” panted Juliet, holding down sobs. “But you won’t do her any good with me—or yourself either. You were scared *blue* when I said the eye of the clasp looked to the right instead of to the left, like the eye on your seal ring. You’d hardly believe it till you *had* to. Then the whole thing grew clear to you, as it’s growing for me now. This copy existed. The clasp was made the wrong way, by mistake or on purpose. As soon as I spoke, you *knew* what had happened. Your first thought—as soon as you could think—was to save that woman. But you shan’t save her! I——”

“Do you intend to make a scandal of this beastly business?” the Duke cut her short with violence. “If you do, you will repent it all your life.”

Juliet quivered. “I don’t care about my life now,” she said. “You’ve spoilt it. You couldn’t punish me any more than you’ve punished me already—for loving and trusting you. So it doesn’t matter what I——”

“It matters immensely,” he broke in again. “You are cruel to yourself—to me—to a woman who has

never injured you. When I say that you'll repent making a scandal, I don't mean because I'd try to 'punish' you. My God, no! You'll repent because you will be doing a great injustice which can't possibly be repaired. And at heart, when you're true to yourself, you are just."

"It's no use your trying to appeal to my sense of justice," Juliet warned him. "That's the last thing for *you* to bring up!"

He looked at her very sadly, very strangely, it seemed to his wife, as if anger were dying out, and a great sorrow had taken its place. But that was only his cleverness—his deadly, Irish cleverness, of course!

"What, then, do you intend to do?" he asked.

Once more confusion fogged the girl's brain, a desolate confusion like chaos after ordered beauty; the end of all joy, all loveliness.

"I don't know yet," she said, dully. "I shall have to think."

As Juliet spoke, fingers tapped lightly on the door: Simone's fingers, no doubt. Her fifteen minutes of banishment had passed.

"Come in!" Juliet spoke mechanically; and if she wished to withdraw the words, it was too late. The Frenchwoman opened the door.

"*Madame la Duchesse* is ready for me to finish dressing her?" she asked.

Vaguely it struck Juliet that Simone's voice was

not quite natural. She had probably been listening at the keyhole, and had heard everything. But, on second thoughts, what *did* it matter? Juliet told herself miserably that nothing could be the same as it had been. She could not go on after this, living with Pat as his wife. All the world would soon know that there was trouble between them, and Simone's knowing first was of little importance. She was only a servant, and luckily a loyal and discreet servant.

As Juliet paused a second before speaking, Claremanagh answered for her: "The Duchess is feeling very tired, and as you know, I'm not well. We've about decided to telephone that we can't go out," he said.

"But not *quite* decided," his wife amended. "I think that if you prefer to stay at home, I shall go and make your excuses in person."

Pat showed surprise. He had taken it completely for granted that she would not dream of dining at the Van Estens'. "No," he decided, after an instant's thought. "If you are equal to it, so am I."

"He's afraid to trust me alone," Juliet told herself, "for fear I shall say something." "Very well, she said aloud. "You better hurry up and get ready, then. We're late as it is."

Pat did not answer. Without another word or look he went to his room and shut the door between. Evidently Nickson had not been with his master to-night. Juliet wondered where the man was,

and with a bitter sense of amusement pictured "Old Nick's" emotions if she began a suit for divorce against the Duke. She had always liked the queer fellow, who had been as fine a soldier, Pat said, as he was an indifferent valet: had liked him partly because of his thrilled admiration of her. Deeply as he adored her at present, however, that love was nothing beside what he felt for the Duke. It made Juliet a shade more miserable than before to know that the worshipping Nick would soon cease to worship. So far, she had kept back her tears, but they were becoming irrepressible when Simone exclaimed: "Oh, the wonderful pearls! *Madame la Duchesse* has let them fall on the floor."

The current of Juliet's thoughts changed instantly, and the brimming tears dried at their source.

"The wonderful pearls!" she repeated, with infinite bitterness, sure as she was that Simone had been at the keyhole. But the look of pained astonishment on the woman's face made her wonder if, after all, Simone *had* heard "everything." Perhaps she had caught parts only of the conversation, and had been trying to find out "for sure" whether she had heard aright.

Juliet had perfect trust in Simone, so far as discretion was concerned, but it was within her estimate of the maid's character that she should eavesdrop. People of her class did that sort of thing and thought it no harm. It made the drama of their lives! Si-

mone would keep her knowledge or her suspicion to herself, of course, until whatever was fated to happen had happened. Then, no doubt, she would tell her friends that she'd "known all along." Still, Juliet suddenly disliked the thought of being pitied even by her maid. Simone was aware that her mistress had looked forward to getting the pearls. It was humiliating that she should have instead a mere string of wax or fish-scale beads! If Simone had heard, it couldn't be helped. If she hadn't, however, she should remain in ignorance.

"They're not quite as glorious as I expected them to be," Juliet remarked. "I suppose it's like that with everything in life."

"But they are very beautiful," ventured Simone with the privileged air of the old and trusted servant which she put on like a sort of chain armour at times. "Will *Madame la Duchesse* wear them to-night?"

Juliet was taken aback. She had, of course, intended to wear the Tsarina pearls. She had told herself that she would do so, if only that everyone should see that she, not Pavoya, had them. But since discovering the truth about them—why, it had not occurred to her that she could wear the things! Rather would she have thrown them into the fire. Suddenly, however, she saw the matter from another point of view. Suppose she did appear wearing the rope? To do so would give her time to

think. And it would be interesting to see Pat's face when he caught sight of them.

"Oh, yes, I'll wear the pearls," she said. "You know perfectly well I had this shot blue and silver tissue made on purpose to go with them. Why shouldn't I wear them, Simone?"

Simone did not answer, because she understood that no answer was expected. She *had* overheard something, and it was not her fault that she had not overheard all. Unfortunately for her the room was large, and the Duke and Duchess had stood talking at a good distance from the door. The manner of her mistress, however, filled up several aching gaps in Simone's curiosity; and putting together what she knew and what she surmised, the maid changed her mind as to her own wisest course of conduct.

She had intended to sacrifice inclination to prudence, and say nothing to the Duchess about the Polish dancer's visit that afternoon. Now, she decided that it would be best to mention it. How to work up to the subject was the only doubt on that score left in her mind.

"*Madame la Duchesse is merveilleuse—etincilante!*" she cried, as she held the rope of big blue beads over Juliet's head, and let it fall gently upon the swans-down whiteness of the bare neck. "Madame was perfect as a girl. Now she goes beyond perfection. Other women are charming—the beautiful Pole, Mademoiselle Pavoya for instance, but——"

Juliet darted upon her a piercing, angry glance. "What makes you think or speak of Pavoya just now?" she sharply questioned.

"Oh—I hardly know. Except that she *is* of a great beauty, and—in her way—of a strange attraction. And then, also, as no doubt Togo told *Madame la Duchesse*, la Pavoya called to-day."

"Called to-day!" echoed Juliet. "You don't mean *here*?"

"But yes, Madame. Did not Madame know? I was about to go out with the bulldog. Being permitted to pass down by the front stairs, I saw the lady arrive. To be sure, she had on a thick embroidered veil through which, perhaps, many people would not recognize the most famous features. But my eyes are sharp. And then, her figure! There are not two such. Though, to my taste, that of *Madame la Duchesse* is more alluring, more human. The dancer is a mere *sprite*! I said to myself, 'It must be about the charity performance for the Armenians that she is here to consult with my mistress!'"

As she thus interpreted her own impressions, Simone busied herself in getting Juliet's ermine cloak, which previously she had laid ready on the bed. Sometimes, when the Claremanaghs were going out together in the evening, the Duke came in and took his wife's coat from Simone, slipping it in a leisurely and loving way over the white arms, as

if he never tired of touching the adorable creature who belonged to him. But Simone did not think he would come to perform that office to-night; and besides, she wanted an excuse to escape from her mistress's great, wide-open blue eyes. The maid had taken a tactful way of explaining the dancer's (possible) motive for calling; because if she dared to accuse the Duke by a hint, the Duchess would be bound to stop her.

Juliet was struck dumb for a moment. She would not have thought, after what had passed between her and Pat, that she could be surprised by anything concerning him and Pavoya, but now she knew that she could be astounded.

Pavoya had called! Togo had let her in, the traitor! bribed by Claremanagh, who had sunk low enough even for *that!* Still, *had* Togo let the woman in? It was easy to make sure.

"A pity I was out," Juliet said. "I suppose she went away when she heard that?"

"No, Madame, she came in," replied Simone with the innocence of a child. "I do not know how long she stayed. *Monsieur le Duc* will tell Madame that. It was to his study that Togo took her."

"Oh, very well. I can ask him what message she left," Juliet promptly cut short this confidence. She had no wish to learn more, and her suppression of Simone was no triumph of honour over curiosity. She felt a sick, languid repulsion against the whole

subject, for she knew the worst now, and any further information would be a kind of horrid anti-chimax.

“Oh, Pat, Pat!” her heart mourned. “How has my idol fallen! And he talked so nobly about never lying!”

That night, when the Duke and Duchess of Claremanagh came into their box in time for the second act of “Rigoletto,” everyone “in the know” said “Look! She’s got the Tsarina pearls at last!”

And Claremanagh wondered at her. He wondered terribly, abysmally, why, after their scene together, and her threats, she had worn the abominable things. He had wondered about that ever since, the ermine cloak removed, he had seen the blue beads on her neck at the Van Estens’.

He ought, perhaps, to have rejoiced at the sight, for she could not wear a rope of imitation pearls, and accuse Lyda Pavoya of stealing the real ones. That would be to punish him less severely than herself. Yet Pat was uneasy as well as unhappy. The only thing he understood clearly in all the hideous affair was that—he understood Juliet not at all. He asked himself over and over again a question he could not, would not ask her—what, in God’s name, she intended to do next?

All the way home, when at length they were again alone together in their brilliantly lit limousine, she did not utter one word, nor once look at him. She sat quite still, pretending to be asleep, but Clare-

managh knew that he was no wider awake than she. A dozen times he longed to speak; but there are some things a man cannot do. She seemed to have barricaded herself behind a transparent wall, through which he could see, yet not touch, her—as if she had been a lovely statuette under a glass case.

At the house she sprang past him quickly, without accepting his help to alight, and ran up the two or three marble steps. Claremanagh had his key, but before he could use it Juliet pressed the electric bell, and Togo appeared. The girl did not look back at her husband, to see whether he meant to follow. And suddenly he did not mean to do so. He hadn't been sure, at first, what he would do: but he could not bear to have her shut the door of her room upon him, as she surely would.

With a gesture he signed to Togo that he was not coming in. The car waited, but he said to the chauffeur in the pleasant, courteous tone which won the affection of servants, "I shan't want you—thanks."

In that mood, he could not make use of Juliet's car. He preferred the poor independence of his own feet, even while he laughed at himself, bitterly, for so petty a revolt. He walked to the "Grumblers," that one of his several clubs at which he was likely to meet a man with whom he had business—business important enough to remember even now.

"I won't keep the beastly money on me any longer," he thought. "The fellow shall have it to-night."

CHAPTER X

THE HOUSE IN A CROSSTOWN STREET

IF SIMONE had not already telephoned to the private office of the *Inner Circle's* editor, she might have changed her mind about going there that night. She was less superstitious and of harder mental fibre than most Frenchwomen of the south and of her class; but after the quarrel between the Duke and Duchess something within her shrank from keeping the secret appointment she had made.

It was not that she was suddenly conscience-stricken, or that she thought her mistress had suffered enough without having the skeleton in the cupboard dangled in front of the public. The woman was incapable of any real love save self love, but she liked Juliet, and would have inflicted upon her no great gratuitous pain. The pain to be inflicted in this instance, however (as well as other instances in the past), was not gratuitous. Simone would be magnificently paid for inflicting it, and so far as Juliet was concerned, she could earn the reward without a qualm. It was for herself that she hesitated; and she did not quite know why.

That was the trouble! If she had known, she

could have argued out the two sides of the matter, for and against. But it was only a vague sort of presentiment she felt, that she would somehow be sorry if she gave this story to the paper she served. And it might not be a proper presentiment at all, but only a form of indigestion. She had (she too vividly recalled) taken at luncheon three helpings of lobster salad, a dish which never agreed with her. Besides, she was naturally excited over her part in the events of the day. And then she *had* telephoned the office. She had camouflaged her message, lest it should be overheard, but what she had said would inform the editor that she had up her sleeve the best tit-bit he had ever got from her.

To-morrow afternoon the *Inner Circle* (a weekly publication) would be on sale, and the "Whisperer's" columns were always kept back till the latest possible moment, on account of just such morsels dropping in.

But to-night the last paragraphs were to be held up expressly for Simone almost beyond the time-limit. She was bound to "make good" or she would never be trusted again, and if the editor were satisfied she was to receive exactly five times the sum she got for more or less valuable items supplied each week.

With a vague, uneasy presentiment in one scale, and five hundred dollars in the other (notes, not a cheque; the *Inner Circle* never paid cheques for "Whisperer" stuff) the presentiment was outweighed.

Simone had in any case a dinner engagement which nothing short of death would have induced her to miss; and the Duchess had not been gone quite ten minutes when she flew out to keep it.

She said nothing to her dinner companion, however, about the later appointment, and excused herself early on the plea that it would be "like Madame to flash in at home, clamouring for her maid, between Mrs. Van Esten's party and the opera, if only for a minute."

Certainly it was little more than a minute that Simone remained at the Phayre house after being brought back after dinner in a taxi. At the end of that time she was out again, and on her way to the office of the *Inner Circle*.

About this place there was always something mysterious even to Simone's practical and unimaginative mind, and the private office of the editor was the heart of the mystery—the inner circle of the *Inner Circle*. For years she had been a highly paid contributor to the scandalous little paper, ever since she had entered her first "smart" situation in New York, and had been approved by a man whose outward business was straightforward reporting for the "Society" columns of a reputable daily. When in town, Simone had been in the habit of calling in person instead of trusting to the post, and since her value had become recognized, she was invariably received by the editor himself in that very private

sanctuary of his. Yet to this day she had never seen his face, and did not know his real name.

"Mr. Jones will speak to you," was the message telephoned down from regions above to the amateurish little reception room, where an elderly, mild-faced lady in old-fashioned dress received visitors and tapped a typewriter.

But the Frenchwoman was sure that outside the office HE was other than "Mr. Jones," as sure as that Simone Amaranthe was at home Simonetta Amaranti.

The editor's private office was divided practically into two by means of a fixed screen or partition of match-boarding so high that even if an enterprising caller jumped on to a chair he (or she) could not see what lay on the other side. There was no door in this screen, therefore no danger existed that the editor could be "rushed." Against the partition was placed a table and a chair of the ordinary "office furniture" type; and other decoration there was none. On the table were writing materials, and a small house-telephone. By means of this instrument one spoke to the Presence on the other side, and he spoke in return. That it was always the same Presence, Simone knew by the voice. It was peculiar, mincing, and rather effeminate, and though she shrewdly attributed this quality to disguise, it could not well have been imitated by an understudy.

This happened to be the first time Simone had ever been to the office at night. It was in a cross-town street, within possible walking distance of the Phayre house; and this was luck for her, as she would have taken a taxi with great reluctance. This errand of hers was the most ticklish she had ever carried out, and she could not afford to leave the least detail to chance, in case a hue and cry should be raised by the Clarenanaghs. Twenty minutes' brisk walk brought her to the door of what had once been a private house, and was now given up to offices. The *Inner Circle* occupied the two lower floors, and above was quite a well-known, though not very fashionable, manicurist, Madame Veno. Still higher, the fourth (and top) floor was tenanted by a wig maker who widely advertised a hair-dye "Goldenglints"; and once, when a wave of rage against the "Whisperer" swept New York, it was rumoured that both these businesses were secretly owned by the *Inner Circle*. No proof was obtainable, however, and since then several new managers had come and gone, both for Madame Veno and "Goldenglints."

To-night the whole house front looked so darkly brooding to Simone's worried eyes that she could have believed anything of it, especially anything that was hideous and evil.

There were no lights in the windows, and the front door, always open by day, was closed. But the voice which answered Simone's call on the 'phone

that afternoon had warned her that this would be so, and had told her what to do. Following instructions, she descended the steps to a basement door, and touched an electric bell above which, on a small brass plate, was the word "Janitor."

Two or three minutes passed, and brought no answer. But suddenly, as Simone was about to ring again, the door opened on a chain.

"What do you want?" a woman's voice demanded through the aperture.

"To see the editor of the *Inner Circle*," replied Simone. "I have an appointment with him."

"Oh! What is your name?" questioned the voice.

"Mademoiselle Simone Amaranthe."

The chain fell, and the door opened as if the Frenchwoman, challenged, had given the countersign. Simone squeezed through the small space allowed her, and the door instantly shut.

It was dark in the basement passage except for the light that came from a room at the back. The woman—the janitor's wife, perhaps—had a little knitted shawl over her head, as though she were suffering from neuralgia. Simone could not see what she was like, whether old or young, except that her silhouette loomed tall and slender against the dim light.

"Can you find your way up?" asked the voice.

"Yes," said Simone, "I was told it would be dark,

and that I must bring an electric torch. I have brought it."

"Very well. Go up, and knock when you come to the door. Mr. Jones is expecting you."

Simone switched on the flame of her torch, and went up.

CHAPTER XI

IN JACK'S PRIVATE SITTING ROOM

NEXT morning Jack Manners was hideously jerked from sleep before eight by the jangle of a telephone bell close to his bed. In self-defence he reached out and grabbed the receiver, in haste to stop the din.

"Hello!" his voice said: but his tone said "Damn"! And he was astounded when Juliet answered. Juliet! 'phoning at this hour! Juliet, who had been at the opera last night, as he happened to know, and who had always loved her beauty sleep, as a young bird loves its nest!

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Jack," she was saying. "I suppose you were fast asleep, and you'll wish you hadn't told me you were going to stop at the Tarascon. But I can't help it! Do you mind getting up and dressing in a hurry, and letting me come round to see you?"

"Shan't I call at your house instead?" Jack suggested, wide awake now.

"No, I must come to you. Have you a private sitting room?"

"I haven't."

"Then take one at once, and be ready to receive me in it. Will half an hour be too soon for you?"

"Not a bit," Jack assured her. He spoke with the warmth of affection, and felt it. But that was all he felt. The reaction he'd been expecting yesterday hadn't come yet!

He 'phoned downstairs that he wanted a private sitting room, and breakfast for two, with flowers on the table, in half an hour. Then he plunged into his bath, and as he shaved and dressed with the haste that knows how not to waste a single step or gesture (this was characteristic of him) he wondered, as he had wondered yesterday, about himself and Juliet.

Funny, how he had dreaded meeting her married, for fear the boiling lava should break through the cooled crust! And the lava hadn't broken through. He couldn't even feel it boil. Juliet had her old sweetness, and charm—even more. She was prettier than ever, too.

He still loved her, of course, only the love didn't hurt like a wound with someone twisting a knife in it, as it had hurt when she told him she was engaged, and on the day of her wedding. There was just a gentle, rather interesting pain, like the pain of remembering a beautiful dream which had broken off in the midst; and it was no sharper this morning than when she came to tea with him yesterday.

Just to test himself he had gone to the opera, and

stood up (because there wasn't a seat to be had) in order to have Juliet burst upon him in all her glory, wearing the pearls, and, perhaps, beaming with recovered happiness at Claremanagh's side. Well, she had come late into her box, and made a sensation. Everyone had stared at her—and the pearls—through levelled glasses. She had been just as glorious as he'd expected, though she hadn't exactly beamed. And he—Jack—had not turned a hair! He hardly knew whether to attribute this to his superhuman self-control, or the strong moral barrier set up between his thoughts and his love by her marriage.

Anyhow, there it was! He was enduring no Calvary, and his heart played none of the tricks it would have played once at being awakened by Juliet's voice, with the request for a meeting alone with him. All he felt was sympathetic interest, and a fear that the girl was coming to say she'd made a hash of things, in spite of his advice.

In precisely twenty-five minutes after the first call of the telephone bell in his ear, he was dressed, and criticising the arrangement of La France roses on the table in his new sitting room. Sharp on the half hour, again came the jangling call.

"Lady for you, sir. Says she's your cousin, and it's not necessary to give her name. You're expecting her."

"Quite right," Manners answered. "Send her up

at once. I'll meet her at the lift." Which he did, and got rather a shock at seeing Juliet all in black—even a black veil.

"I don't think I *ever* saw you dressed like that before," he began, leading her to the sitting room. "I thought you always hated black clothes."

"So I did. So I do. That's the reason I'm wearing them to-day," the girl almost breathlessly explained. "I suppose you'll think it's melodramatic of me, and maybe it is, though I don't feel so. I wanted to put on mourning."

"Good heavens! What for?"

"My happiness."

If she had been less beautiful, that announcement certainly would have sounded a melodramatic note—or else it would have been funny. But she was so white, so big eyed, so like a broken lily in her black draperies, that Jack's heart yearned over her. She leaned to him wistfully, as they stood just inside the closed door, her hands in his; and the man knew suddenly that it would be perfectly safe and good for him to take her in his arms. He held them out, having dropped her hands, and the girl flung herself on his breast as she used to do when she was ten, if a finger had been cut or a knee bruised. The next moment she was crying on his shoulder as though her heart would break, her slim young body an incarnate sob as it heaved and shook in his clasp.

"Oh, Jack, you're the only one I have in the world now!" she gasped.

"Nonsense, nonsense, child. You've got Claremanagh. You'll always have him," he soothed her. "This is some passing trouble. It will blow over. Tell me all about it. But no, first you must have breakfast. You haven't had bite or sup, I'll bet!"

History repeated itself. Again his handkerchief was out. He wiped her eyes with it. He mopped them. How long and dark her lashes were, wet and clinging together! He bent over her, and kissed her forehead. It was hot, and she smelled like a ripe, delicious peach. But his pulses hardly tingled. He was too sorry for her, however, to analyze his own feelings much, or even think of himself, although after years the Adored One—married, and belonging to another man—was in his arms!

Of course she hadn't had breakfast, she said. She didn't want breakfast. The very idea of it made her sick. She had been awake all night, and had been dressed—without a maid to help her—since seven. She was just one bunch of raw, aching nerves! But somehow Jack was able to soothe her a little, as Pat, at his best, could never have done, because she loved him too wildly. Jack got her to the sofa, her back to the door, so that the waiter bustling in with breakfast should not see the tear-stained face. Soon there were cushions behind her shoulders; the blinds were pulled half down; there was a cool, dewy

rose in her hand. Then, when the waiter had gone, she was sipping hot coffee with cream in it and (on one knee beside the sofa) Jack was feeding her with bits of toasted and buttered roll. In spite of herself, Juliet felt better. She didn't *want* to feel better, but she did! And she had drunk nearly a cupful of coffee before Jack let her begin to talk.

Having begun, however, she told him everything. It all came out with a rush, and Jack listened in silence. Not once did he interrupt, and, fast as she spoke (she could not control her speech to slowness), she thought that he was judging, classifying each incident, considering how one bore upon another.

He did not give away his own secret of yesterday: that he had seen Lyda Pavoya go into the house, and that he had known she must be hidden somewhere in the room while he and Defasquelle were in Claremanagh's study. There was nothing to be gained by telling the poor girl that. She might even be aggravated, by the additional proof against Pavoya, into accusing the woman as a thief! And the more he thought, the more inclined he was to advise against an open scandal.

"So you see why I wanted to put on mourning for my dead happiness," Juliet finished. "You said this was a 'passing trouble.' But you can't say that *now*, can you?"

"Yes. I can and do," Jack maintained stoutly, for her sake wholly, not for Claremanagh's. He

began to believe, in his heart, that this generous, loving girl had been badly "let down," between the Duke and the Polish dancer. Nevertheless, it was still only fair to give "Pat" (as Juliet called him) the benefit of the doubt, just as he had urged yesterday. "You say yourself that, judging from his manner when the box was opened, and when you spoke about the clasp, Claremanagh was as surprised as you were at the false pearls being there."

"Yes. Of course I don't accuse him of 'stealing' the real ones himself, as he so cruelly pretended I did. But he must have had this copy made for Pavoya. Probably she thought at first that she had the true pearls, and when she found out how she'd been tricked, she made up her mind to turn the tables on Pat. Or else she saw a way to humble me—his wife. Yes, *that* must be it! I'm glad—glad I wore the horrid imitation rope last night. I hardly knew why I did it, unless it was for a kind of bluff. But I see now, it was more like inspiration. If I choose to stick to it that I have the real pearls, she can't get much fun out of wearing them, can she? People will believe *me*, instead of her, if it comes to open defiance."

"It won't come to that, from Pavoya, and it oughtn't from you, I think," said Jack. "My theory is rather different from yours."

"What is it, for heaven's sake?"

"It's rather scrappy as yet. But so far, I should

think Pavoya might have been working in a much more subtle way than you suppose. I knew that once, long ago, and again later, there was a plot to steal the pearls. Apparently both times it was got up by Russians. And you know they were royal pearls, given by the Tsarina of his day to Claremanagh's great-great-grandfather. Pavoya's a Pole, I believe, but she may be in Russian pay, or under Bolshevik influence. It certainly looks, on circumstantial evidence, as if she'd somehow got hold of the pearls, either in Paris, through Louis Mayen, unknown to his messenger; or else, yesterday by some amazing sleight of hand, while she was in Claremanagh's study. If she could have worried out of him the combination of the safe—and if by some excuse she induced him to leave her in the room alone after Defasquelle delivered up the box (we might assume she came at that time on purpose, perhaps *not* by Pat's invitation) she might have managed the job. Well—but that's about as far as my mind has worked, so far. Except that Claremanagh can't be expected to give the woman away so long as he isn't dead sure she's guilty—or which he hopes against hope that she isn't. He wouldn't accuse her, or have her accused if he could help it, even to save himself from your suspicions, which must make him writhe!"

"Are you standing up for him?" Juliet asked, quickly.

"No, not especially. But you've done him an

injustice in one detail, to begin with. He did *not* have the copy of the Tsarina pearls made for Pavoya. He didn't have it made at all. It was done before his day—done by his mother's order. He told me the story in Paris, where the everlasting subject was you—you and the pearls. It seems that the Duchess—your Pat's mother—soon after her marriage received an anonymous letter warning her of a plot to steal the Tsarina pearls. It was signed 'A Well Wisher', and the writing looked foreign, but not ill spelt or uneducated. There was a hint that the plan was Russian, and the thieves would not be 'ordinary thieves.' Immediately after the Duchess ordered a London jeweller to copy the rope, clasp and all. When it was ready she had the real thing locked up in the bank. The copy was so good that no one except an expert could tell the difference. But there had been one mistake. The eye of the design in the clasp looked the wrong way—to the right instead of the left. However, hardly any one knew which way the original eye turned, so the mistake didn't matter much, and the family didn't trouble to have it rectified. That was a long time ago. But years after there came another warning; and when it was compared with the first the handwriting appeared to be the same. This time the letter was addressed to Claremanagh, who had come of age and had lent the pearls to some charitable exhibition. 'Russia will try again to get back her

own. Take care,' the letter said—or something like that. I've forgotten the precise words Pat used. And it was signed, as before: 'A Well Wisher'. Now you see what my mind's working on."

"I do see," said Juliet. "Of course, in a way you make things look better for Pat. At least, he wasn't infatuated enough with that woman to have a copy of those famous pearls actually made for her to wear. Still, he must have given them to her—or lent them."

"I suppose so," Jack admitted, "unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Well, I know nothing about the lady except what I've heard—and that she's a dream of a dancer. But right or wrong, she has the reputation of being a tigerish young person when her blood's up. And it's conceivable she may simply have *annexed* the imitation pearls: put them on to 'see how she looked,' and refused to disgorge! Claremanagh isn't the sort of fellow who would be brutal with a pretty woman."

"He isn't, indeed! But, anyhow, he let her keep the things—and wear them, too; even if she never had the real ones. He receives her at the house when I'm out—when he pretends to be shut up with a cold. It must have been arranged that she should come then, and Togo bribed to let her in. Oh, it's all nearly as bad as it can be, if not *quite*! Pat doesn't deserve that his mind should be eased as it must have been when he saw at the last minute that I was wear-

ing the horrid false beads last night. He'd been in *such* a state, for fear I'd 'make a scandal!' When he saw the rope on my neck, and heard me calmly accepting compliments on it, I suppose he thought, 'That settles *that*. She can't accuse dear Lyda now!' But he forgets. I can find proof enough to divorce him, without bringing up a question of the pearls at all."

"Is that what you intend to do?" asked Jack.

Juliet threw out her hands in a gesture of feverish weariness. "I don't know what I intend," she sighed, hopelessly, "I wish I could just *die*. Then maybe Pat would be sorry."

"That's what you used to say about your family when you were a kid. No doubt Pat would be sorry if you died. But wouldn't *you* be sorry—when you'd divorced him?"

"I don't care whether I'm sorry or not," cried Juliet. "I'm too miserable now to care about how I may feel then."

"That's the state of mind for jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire," said Jack. "Listen, my kid, did you come here to me to ask my advice?"

"Yes, partly. Though I wouldn't promise to take it if it was anything I didn't like. But mostly I came for something else."

"What?"

"To beg you to *help* me. Help's better than advice."

"You ought to know I'll help you, in any way I jolly well can——"

"In *any* way?" she caught him up.

Jack was slightly startled, knowing Juliet as he did know her: impulsive, even unscrupulous, if a thing passionately wished for were to be obtained—like all spoiled young women, to whom life has refused nothing. "Why not out with it at once, and not beat round the bush?" he asked. "You've some special thing in your mind——"

"I have," she cut him short. "But, truly, Jack, I hadn't when I came. I was just going to ask for your advice and help, mixed up together. You were to advise me what to do; and then if I wanted to do it, you were to help get it done. I've no one except you to depend on, and you were my only hope—if I had any hope left—of making things somehow work out right in the end. It's you yourself who has given me the real idea—the inspiration: the thing to be done. And if you are the one person on earth who can do it, the question is—will you?"

"I can't suppose a 'question,'" Manners said, "if the thing is a thing that will *really* help you."

"It will—it will, more than *anything* else. But you might think it—*caddish*."

"You wouldn't ask me to do it, I'm sure, if it were *caddish*."

"Well—you see, I'm a girl—a woman. It doesn't seem *caddish* to me, as it may to a man. But, Jack,

it's to *save* me! It's the one hope to make life worth living—or to know the worst and not wear out my soul in suspense. I can't bear suspense."

"Neither can I," Jack reminded her.

He was sitting beside her on the sofa now, and Juliet seized his hands. "The thing is—I want you to get acquainted with Lyda Pavoya," she ventured at last. "To contrive to be her *friend*, to win her confidence even if you must make love to her. Stop at nothing, until she's told you the whole secret of the pearls. That secret means everything to me. Wrapped up in it is the secret I care so much more for, the secret of Pat's love—whether it's hers or mine. And his honour is bound up with it, too. Will you do this for me, Jack? Or is it too much?"

Never had Jack Manners thought that he could pull his hands away from Juliet's clinging fingers, and push her off almost roughly, as she would have held him. But now he did both, before he had realized what he was doing. And he even felt a hot resentment against her, not unlike repulsion: Juliet, whom he had worshipped for years—Juliet, for whom his life would have been a small gift!

Before he quite knew what had happened to him, he was standing at the window, staring out. He had not answered, had spoken no word. She ought to understand that no answer was the one safe answer a man could give . . . "Caddish!" . . . She had wondered if he would "think it caddish!" Perhaps

women *were* cads—just naturally. He had heard it said that they didn't know the difference. But *Juliet!*

Standing there with his back to her, he began to gather his wits together to face her attack. She would reproach him with violence. He would try not to be harsh, because she wasn't herself, of course. He would explain that what she asked wasn't "too much"; it wasn't a question of quantity but quality. There were some things a man couldn't do. . . .

But she wasn't reproaching him. She was crying. God! he had never heard a woman cry as that girl was crying! Such sobs would tear her soul to pieces. They mustn't go on. They would kill her—and him!

He went back to her. He knelt on the floor, and drew into his arms the shaken figure, abandoned among the cushions.

"Don't, don't, my dear—my sweet one!" he implored awkwardly smoothing the ruffled gold of her hair. "Trust old Jack! I'll do something. I'll find out for you. I don't know how. Goodness knows how! But I'll worm her secret from that Pavoya girl!"

CHAPTER XII

“THE ‘WHISPERER’ STUFF”

“MY GOODNESS *gracious!*” gasped Natalie Lowndes. “Billy—wake up! Have you seen ‘the Whisperer stuff’?”

Billy woke up.

It was just after dinner, early yet to begin the real evening at the Grumblers (known to some outsiders as the “Plunderers”) Club; and Lowndes had been killing time with a nap.

“Whisperer stuff?” he repeated, in a dazed, almost startled way; and when Billy looked startled he was not at his best. Some years ago he had been considered handsome: a big, athletic fellow with wavy auburn hair brushed back from a low forehead, reddish bronze skin, and big black eyes like those of his sister, Lady West. But the auburn hair had faded and thinned, growing far back on the forehead, which had now become unnaturally high. He was less athletic than he had been, because his principal exercise was taken indoors these days, and consisted of bridge and poker, poker and bridge, varied by roulette. His splendid muscular development was slowly degenerating into fat; and his large face was

all red without the bronze. His eyes, too, had changed, and though still big had a goggling prominence that was not attractive. This was why he did not, when startled, look his best. The eyes goggled—his wife said to herself—like a pollywog's. And aloud she said to him: "*Don't* pretend not to know what I mean by 'Whisperer' stuff."

"I was asleep," Lowndes excused himself, mildly.

"You don't need to tell me that by word of *mouth*," Natalie shrugged. "You've been advertising the fact through another organ. Besides, you never can keep awake fifteen minutes after dinner if we're alone together. Not that it matters! . . . What I asked was, *have* you seen 'the Whisperer stuff' in this week's *Inner Circle*?"

"No," returned Lowndes. "Don't you know I never read the rag? I've told you so pretty often."

"Everybody tells everybody else that they never read it. Yet I suppose it sells hundreds of thousand a week. My copy's just come in. Jane brought it—and you didn't hear her because you were snoring. I thought you might have seen it at the club before you left, and not said anything so as to make me speak first."

"Why, has the viper got in a dig against us?"

"Vipers don't dig. No, thanks to Heaven or the other thing, there's nothing on us. But it's all about someone you're just as much interested in—*more*

interested than you are in me, anyhow. Juliet Claremanagh."

"Oh!" Billy sat up straight in his chair, though he did not seem to be as intensely excited as his wife had thought he would be. "Does the pig mention her by name?"

"The pig does not. He might as well, though, for everybody will know who's meant. By Jove, I wouldn't be *Juliet* to-night!"

"I believe you!" grunted Lowndes. But he did not believe her. He seldom did; and in this instance not at all, because he was sure she would give her eyes to be Juliet, just as sure as that he would give his to be Juliet's husband. "What's the racket this time?"

"I'll read the stuff aloud to you," said his wife; and began: "Let's Whisper!"

"That a certain foreign gentleman of title, with one of the prettiest and richest young wives in New York, is much to be sympathized with, because he has got a bad cold.

"But—he is to be congratulated on the marvellous medicine with which he is able to combat this ailment.

"Let's Whisper again!

"This medicine is worth its weight in gold. Only millionaires can afford to take it at home, and alone, as Louis of Bavaria used to take Wagner's operas.

"We know he was alone, because the pretty, rich young wife was out, full up with engagements for the whole

afternoon. And we know he is a millionaire—oh, we know it in such a simple way! It’s because his wife is a millionairess. See? The ‘Whisperer’ thought you would!

“And now for the Medicine. That needs another whisper. Sh!

“We spell it with a capital M, because it has been a royal Medicine since Salome, the daughter of Herodias, administered it to King Herod. Dancing is a fine art, and its greatest exponent at present in our city is fair enough to cure any King (to say nothing of the lesser nobility) even if she did not dance for him. But of course, the ‘Whisperer’ is sure she did dance, because with what other motive should she pay a call of consolation upon a nobleman with a cold, when his wife was not at home to nurse him? Can you think of any?

“Let’s Whisper, that black is very becoming to tall slender ladies with white skin and copper hair, even when they wear thick veils. Nothing suits them better, unless it’s pale blue, and blue pearls. But ladies with golden hair have now taken to appearing in blue pearls—ropes of them. The ‘Whisperer’ supposes they are real. Why, certainly! Could they be otherwise? Yet, on the other hand, are there two such ropes in the world? We shall see. We may see any day now! And the ‘Whisperer’ hopes and prays that if we do see there won’t be trouble. Both the ladies are so charming. Pearls are so compromising. And the gentleman is so popular.

"*Let's Whisper: What a game of Consequences!*"

"There!" Mrs. Lowndes finished with a gasp. "What do you think of that?"

"Can you *beat it*?" her husband answered with a question.

"I can't," said Natalie. "But I guess the Duke will beat something or someone. He'll have to."

"You mean the 'Whisperer!' H'm! Before you cook your hare, you've got to *catch* him. A whole lot of men have tried to catch that one. But the *Inner Circle* still circulates."

Natalie brooded for a moment. When she was a girl, in a set that was conspicuous though not first rate, the "Whisperer" had whispered several nasty things about her. He, She, or It had said that she had come from "Peoria or somewhere" to New York to buy a husband, and had kindly warned her that persons not rich enough to pick and choose their goods had better snap up what they could get the first day of the sale, at the cheap bargain-counter. Since she had taken that advice and snapped up Billy Lowndes, the "Whisperer" had for some reason been silent; but Natalie had never forgiven or forgotten the attack on her attractions, and she had always burned to have some other victim arraigned for justifiable homicide.

"I bet Claremanagh will break the vicious *Circle!*" she said.

"And I bet he won't. Why should he bring off a

stunt none of us ever brought? They say there’s nothing to break. Some husband or father goes murder-mad, bursts into the *Circle* office, and finds no one on the premises but a little old lady. Can he bash *that*? Besides, why make a cap fit you by wearing it? Lord knows what that d—d ‘Whisperer’s’ working up to when he hints at the Claremanagh pearls being false. But if they are, the Duke must have sold them himself, and had a copy made—two copies, perhaps. By George, I shouldn’t wonder if that’s just what he *did* do!—sell—I mean, Juliet told my sister Emmy that Claremanagh refused the million or so she wanted to settle on him, and intended to join the working classes over here. He doesn’t get a salary to be proud of, at the Phayre bank, I know for a fact. But I’ve seen him playing poker at the Grumblers and—er—another game elsewhere. Last night he waltzed into the Grumblers after the opera, and I happened to see him pass a roll of yellow-backs as big as my fist into a man’s hand. The other chap dropped the lot, by accident, and the noble Duke stood still with his nose in the air while they were collected. I saw a one thousand-dollar bill with my own eyes, and I have a hunch there were a heap more of the same sort.”

“Who was the man?” Natalie asked, curiously.

“I’ve forgotten his name,” Billy evaded her. “There are a lot of new men in the club lately I know only by sight.”

"Tell that to the marines!" she scoffed. "You've got some reason for keeping his name dark. Did any one else see Claremanagh pay him the money? Because, if they did, I'll be sure to find out."

"I think everyone was pretty busy just then. I wouldn't have seen, if I hadn't been cutting out of a game at the moment. It's nothing to me who the man was. You're always so damned suspicious of anything I say."

Natalie shrugged her shoulders, a favourite gesture. "But not of what you do, I don't care enough," she retaliated, and picked up the *Inner Circle* again to re-read "the Whisperer stuff", while she richly pictured Juliet's feelings.

She didn't know the Duchess very well, but she thought that there would be "ructions."

"Pavoya must have been at the house while Juliet was lunching with me," she told herself. "I shouldn't wonder if the Duke *had* sold his pearls. Won't Juliet be *wild* if she finds out the wonderful rope everyone was talking about last night was *false*?"

Natalie grew so absorbed in settling just what she would write to Emmy West that she did not even speak to Billy when he went out. She was sure he was going to the "Plunderers," and she was right. Nevertheless, she had made one mistake about him. He had told the truth in saying that he did not know the name of the man to whom Claremanagh had

handed a roll of notes. He did, however, wish to know, and as soon as possible. But he arrived to find everyone talking of “the ‘Whisperer’ stuff” in the *Inner Circle*. Most of the men were defending the Duke, who had an extraordinary way of making himself liked without trying; and this vexed Lowndes. He had a grudge against Claremanagh for marrying Juliet Phayre, the only girl who had ever given him a heartache. Losing her and getting Natalie had made him the man he was.

“What I want to find out is, *who* is the chap Claremanagh paid about a hundred thousand dollars to last night, here in this club?” he said.

“A hundred thousand dollars?” somebody echoed. “How do you know?”

“I do know,” Lowndes persisted, provocatively, and made up his mind to stick to the statement. “I do know. And what I’d like to know also, in the circumstances, is how did he get the money?”

“Ask the winds!” laughed the other.

“Easier to ask his wife.”

“You believe she knows?”

“No, not how he got the stuff. But I guess she *thinks* she knows, which is just as interesting.”

Juliet was utterly indifferent that night as to whether or not her thoughts were interesting to outsiders. Pat and herself filled the world for her. There was no one else—not even Jack Manners—

who existed for her after she had read the "Whisperer": except Lyda Pavoya. But the Polish dancer was not for Juliet a fellow-being. She was a Lure-light, a Mermaid, a Siren.

Simone was in the habit of buying the *Inner Circle* for the Duchess on the day of publication. She had never been ordered to do this, but her mistress in the last place she had filled in New York had expected the "rag" to appear in her boudoir as soon as it was on sale, and Simone (with a certain cynical enjoyment) had unobtrusively supplied the paper to Juliet without being asked.

It was a disgrace to New York, and utterly disgusting and unreliable, of course, and Juliet scorned it as a horrid beast. All the same, she read it every week before flinging it on the floor or pitching it into a wastepaper basket. Sometimes she was angry at its nasty digs at people she knew; sometimes she chuckled (one *had* to!). As her car took her home from Jack Manners' hotel she suddenly remembered that it was *Inner Circle* day.

Could that fiend of a "Whisperer" have got hold of anything new about Pat and Pavoya? Juliet could not see that this was possible. But there was almost sure to be some mention of the blue pearls she had worn at the opera, unless the news had been too late for press. She was so miserable already that she wondered at herself for feeling so small a prick in the midst of a deep and all-pervading pain. Yet

she was conscious of uneasiness, and it remained in the back of her mind throughout the day.

She had not expected to see Pat at luncheon, and if she had seen him, she would have suffered disappointment. Whether he were merely resentful against her for the things she had said to him, or whether he were ashamed to face her because he had lied, and she knew it, Juliet could not tell. In his absence, he was as vitally present as if she saw him before her eyes. Indeed, she did see him—with Lyda Pavoya. It seemed certain that he must have gone to Lyda, if only to demand some explanation of what had happened to the pearls. And it was conceivable that, if he were convinced she had robbed him, he might have a reaction of feeling against the woman. In such a case, he would perhaps return and implore his wife to forgive him.

As she thought this, Juliet hardened her heart against his charm, his magnetism which she knew to be almost irresistible. She *would* resist it! It would be ridiculous to let herself be cajoled by Pat's Irish ways. He would laugh in his sleeve if he could persuade her that he had never loved Pavoya.

But the day wore on, and he did not come home.

All she knew about him was that he must have spent some late part of the night in the house, because Simone had casually mentioned an early meeting in the hall as he went out, about nine in the morning. He had handed the maid a few letters,

which he said were for the Duchess to read and attend to, rather than for him. That was all. And though Juliet did not mean to pardon him, she would have given the price of the lost pearls to be begged for her forgiveness.

Now and then, like a faint undertone in wild music, returned the thought of the *Inner Circle*, and at the time when it should be lying on a certain table in her boudoir, Juliet looked for it. The paper was not there!

She had come in from her bedroom, a wrapper thrown over her nightgown, for she was pretending to have a headache, and had gone to bed on returning from the Tarascon, as an excuse for throwing over all engagements.

"There's something horrid about Pat or me in the rag," she guessed instantly. "Simone's read, or heard about it, and means to 'forget' the paper."

It would not be pleasant to ask, but after all Simone was only a servant! Juliet rang the bell communicating with her maid's room, and soon the neat figure in black presented itself.

"*Madame la Duchesse* has rung?"

"Where is that horrid *Inner Circle*?" the Duchess inquired.

Simone looked self-conscious. She said that, Madame being *souffrante*, she had forgotten to buy the paper. It was of so little importance! But Juliet would not be put off. The Frenchwoman was

sent out to get the *Inner Circle*, and when she had got it, was told that she would be needed no more for the moment. Therefore Claremanagh’s wife was alone when she read the “Whisperer’s” insinuations.

Strangely enough—or was it strange?—her anger turned in a torrent-flood against the man who ran the rag. None was left for Pat. Juliet burned for him to come home so that they could—even if “on official terms only”—join together in scotching this scandal. She felt that she must see her husband at once. But she could not send for him without being misunderstood. If she were able to reach him by ’phoning to one of his clubs, he would think that he was being called back to a scene of reconciliation because his wife was too much in love to live without him for more than a day. No! even though her rage was too concentrated in another direction to blaze upon Pat, she didn’t wish him to think that he was forgiven.

Again Jack Manners seemed her best hope, and she ’phoned him at the Tarascon. He was out, the answer came, and Juliet asked that the Duchess of Claremanagh should be called up as soon as he came in.

An hour later the bell of her telephone jingled. Jack had returned to his suite at the Tarascon.

“I thought you’d never come!” she complained.

“But,” he excused himself, “you gave me a mission. I’ve been doing my best to pave the way.”

"You mean you've met Pavoya?"

"Not yet. But I shall meet her to-night. She's dancing, you know. Or—why should you know? An old friend of mine—and hers, too—has arranged an introduction. That's the only news I have for you, so far."

"I didn't ring you up to ask for news," said his cousin, though her quick brain caught at a welcome deduction: if Jack were to meet Pavoya at a party or something, it did not look as if Pat had pardoned her for the pearls. Otherwise they would be together. "I want you to see Pat for me," Juliet went on. "Not to make it up! When you find him, tell him *that* to begin with, please. But he and I must meet, and talk over this horrible 'Whisperer' business. I don't want a scandal—anyhow *that* kind!—any more than he does. Tell him it's cowardly to run away and stay away like this. It makes things worse. Tell him he must come home—or bring him."

"I can't put things to Pat in that way, but I'll see him if you wish," answered Jack. "Where is he?"

"I don't know." (Juliet's voice sounded disconsolate and very young, even through the 'phone.) "At some club, I suppose. Do call me when you've found him."

It was seven o'clock. . . . After three more hours of suspense Juliet rushed to the telephone

at first sound of the bell. If it were not Jack—or Pat—she should scream. But it was Jack.

“I can’t find Claremanagh anywhere, or hear of his movements since two o’clock,” Manners said. “He was then at a club you probably never heard of. It’s called ‘The Joint’. All sorts of men belong—actors, writers, lawyers, sportsmen, and at least *one* private detective! Pat isn’t a member. I shouldn’t have thought of the place if a man I know (the one who will introduce me to Mademoiselle Pavoya) hadn’t mentioned seeing Pat there this morning with two men. That’s why I went round, after I’d tried everywhere else. Well, he was there at five, with the detective I spoke of just now, and a Frenchman named Defasquelle. That name will strike you! He had an appointment to come back and dine with Defasquelle who, it seems, came with an introduction and has been made a foreign member. In fact, he’s staying at the club, and I have been talking with him. In the hope of seeing Pat at eight, I waited, because Defasquelle was so sure he would come. But at half-past nine he hadn’t turned up. I’ve ’phoned everywhere I can think of since, and left word that I’m to be called whenever there’s news, no matter what time. When I go out—as I must do if I’m to meet the *lady*—I shall leave my address with the Tarascon people.”

“What can have happened to Pat!” Manners heard Juliet cry.

“Don’t worry. He’s certain to be all right,” Jack assured her. But he wasn’t quite comfortable upon that point himself and had quietly ’phoned all the hospitals. It looked queer that Claremanagh hadn’t kept that engagement with Defasquelle. He had apparently been anxious to keep it. If there had been an accident to a man so well known, surely the news would have got into the evening papers. Yet there was no news anywhere of any kind, since the Duke had walked out of “The Joint” at five. Were such a thing not too absurdly far-fetched, Jack would have asked himself if any one existed who might wish Claremanagh to disappear?

CHAPTER XIII

A WOMAN'S EYES

“**MADemoiselle PAVOYA**, this is Captain John Manners, just back from France: a cousin of the Duchess of Claremanagh's,” said the manager who was introducing Jack.

Lyda Pavoya lifted her drooping head a little—only a little, and fixed upon Manners a pair of dark eyes. “A pair of dark eyes!” Simple words, and a simple act. There are many women in the world with dark eyes, and many had looked at John Manners. But these eyes of the Polish woman——!

As they gave that upward look from under heavy lashes Manners felt himself a traitor. He had heard all sorts of stories about Lyda Pavoya. He had got an impression that she was a “tigress woman.” And then, the dancing that he had seen her do was wild and barbaric. But to-night she was a swan.

Her eyes were dark, but not black or even brown. They were perhaps a very deep, greenish grey, and extraordinarily luminous. Yes, that was the word: luminous! “Brilliant” would be too hard. There was a mysterious, moonlight sort of luminance between the black fringes of the white lids, and the

whole face—pale, delicate, with pointed chin—was mysterious as only Polish or Russian faces are.

“Why does she look at me so?” Jack thought. It was almost as if she guessed, because he was Juliet’s cousin, why he had asked for this introduction. He could not believe that she, who met so many people, could recognize the man in evening dress as the officer in khaki she had seen on the Phayre doorstep.

They were in a room at the theatre where Mademoiselle Pavoya received privileged persons: a plainly furnished room, mostly grey except for masses of flowers, and it suited her better than a background of fantastic colour. Perhaps it was this greyness which made her stand out so vividly, and seem of such vital, thrilling importance. She was extremely quiet in manner, and her voice was low. Yet her quietness was disturbing, like that of a summer night when lightning may leap from a clear sky.

Manners was struck dumb by her. Something had flashed from her eyes to his with that first look. It did not say merely, “I am a woman. You are a man.” It said—or seemed to say—“You are *the* man. I am *the* woman. We had to meet. And now—what?”

He tried to think that this was a trick of hers which she used on every male worthy of her steel. But he could not believe it to be so. Her perfume—that perfume of an Eastern garden by moonlight—

had gone to his head. No woman had ever produced such an effect upon him, though they had exchanged but a few words, and those not memorable. Yet he was not humiliated by his own surrender. In spite of all reason he was convinced that she had been stirred by him as he by her.

The meeting was between Pavoya's dances, and she had not many minutes to spare. Her manager had impressed upon Manners that the few she gave were an immense concession. There was no hope of prolonging them. Her call came. She had to go. Again eyes met with that shock to the nerves. Suddenly Lyda held out her hand to Jack. Clasp- ing it, electricity flashed up his arm and stabbed at his heart. He felt her start slightly, and his breath quickened.

For Juliet's sake, and the promise he had made, it was Manners' duty to take instant advantage of his "luck" with Pavoya. But he was not thinking about Juliet—or the promise. He was neither remorseful nor triumphant. All he thought of or wanted as they talked in snatches was to hold this woman, not to let her go till he had arranged to meet her again. He must meet her again! He must know what she really was—what they were to be in each other's lives. But he could not ask permission to call. He was stupidly tongue-tied, and could not put words together as he would have wished.

"Would you care to have supper with me at my

house to-night?" she asked, not taking her hand from his.

The invitation was so unexpected that Jack could hardly believe it had been given. Yet he heard himself answering, "Yes, I should be delighted."

"I am glad," she said, in her perfect English, with the pretty accent that was part of her charm. "Perhaps you don't know where I live? I have taken a house, furnished: Mrs. Lloyd-Jackson's house on Park Avenue. You have been there? Supper will be at twelve. Till then——"

She was gone.

"By Jingo, you've made a hit, my boy!" chuckled Pavoya's manager.

It was all Jack could do to detach himself from thoughts of Lyda, and go about Juliet's business between ten-forty and midnight. For the first time in his life the prospect of seeing Juliet was distasteful to him. He didn't want to see her, because she would ask him about Lyda Pavoya, and in his present mood there was nothing he would hate worse than discussing the Polish girl with his cousin. But he was as sorry for Juliet as ever, and just as anxious to help her.

Desperately against the grain, he took a taxi and drove to the Phayre house, which he found brilliantly lighted. The huge front looked so gay that for a moment he hoped Pat had come back. But he asked for the Duke, and was told gravely by Togo

that His Grace was not at home. The Duchess, however, was expecting Captain Manners.

Juliet was waiting, not in her boudoir, but in the Chinese room which her father had loved. She no longer wore the dressing gown she had put on when nursing her headache in the afternoon, but was dazzling in some flame-coloured film over shot gold and purple tissue.

"You've had good news!" Jack exclaimed at sight of her.

"No, I've had none whatever," she said. "If possible, things are worse. I know why you thought something good had happened. All the lights, and this dress! But if you were a woman you'd understand. I've realized that there's a fight in front of me. I want it to be a silent battle. I don't wish people to know I'm fighting at all—till I see what the end's likely to be."

"I do understand," Jack said. "You're a brave girl, and I believe the end will be all right."

He hurried on to talk about Pat, and thus put off the bad moment when she would question him about Pavoya. As nothing had been heard of the missing one and Juliet seemed now even more anxious than angry, Jack decided to confess having telephoned to all the hospitals. It was good news, he insisted, that these enquiries had drawn blank, and he did his best as a comforter by saying that Pat had probably gone off in a huff. People who loved each other

flew into rages more easily than those who didn't care. Men of Pat's temperament didn't lie down quietly to be trampled on by their wives. He'd write soon, or send word somehow when his first fury had exploded. Or, at worst, he would communicate with the bank, even if he didn't turn up for work there.

Meanwhile, however, Jack admitted that they mustn't let things slide and merely "hope for the best." Would Juliet like to have a detective engaged—a private one, of course—quietly to make enquiries, in the very unlikely case that something queer had happened?

"Yes, I was going to suggest that," Juliet said in a hard, bright voice which kept back tears. "What about that detective you spoke of—the one who was with Pat and Defasquelle at the club?"

Jack hesitated. "Well, I think we'd better get a chap of our own. You see, possibly *he* was Pat's man, engaged for the—the pearl business. He mightn't be able to work for us with a whole heart——"

"I know what you mean," Juliet caught Manners up. "Pat's man may know where Pat really is, and lead us off the track, instead of on to it."

"It's just possible," Jack had to agree.

"Would you believe it," the girl veered abruptly to a new subject, "two reporters have called to interview me about the *Inner Circle* stuff?"

"Impudent beasts!" Manners lashed out. "Of course you didn't receive them?"

"Jack, I *did!*" said Juliet. "I'll tell you why. Here in the house I've got more and more proof against Pat—or against *that woman.*" Jack winced, but she was not looking at him: her eyes were full of tears. "Still, I'm doing what you told me to do: I'm giving him 'the benefit of the doubt.' Besides—I've my pride, just as Pat has his. There's my father's name. In its way that's as good as the name of Claremanagh, or all the dukes in Britain. I came to this room to-night because Dad loved it so, and I felt as if he were here in spirit, helping me to be strong. He was such a busy man, yet always he had time for me! I can almost hear his voice saying, 'Steady, Jule!' as he used to say when I was in one of my wild moods. I had those newspapermen brought to me here. And I said to one what I said to the other. I admitted that I'd seen the *Inner Circle*, and I supposed the horrid rag meant *us*. But I simply laughed at the whole thing! I told them Pavoya came to see *me*—something about her dance for the Armenians: you know, the roof-garden show Nancy Van Esten's getting up. I said the insinuation about the pearls was nonsense: that I'm an expert, and that they're the realest things I ever saw. I talked about Pat as if we two were the best of friends, and mentioned just casually that he was away for a few days. I was as nice as I could be to

the men, though I longed to—to *kick* them! I'm sure they both went off to their horrid old newspapers to write beautiful things about the family. Don't you think I did right?"

"Perhaps," said Jack. "If you don't mind being a bit *infra dig*."

"I don't mind anything," Juliet choked, "if only Pat comes back safely and—and—if we can patch up some sort of a life together. If—I don't have to break with him."

"Then you've given up those ideas you had this morning?"

"About divorce? No. I haven't exactly given them up. But they seem far off now—when I'm so afraid for Pat. I've thought of a thousand things that might have happened to him. Suppose he *does* love me really, and Pavoya is jealous? She'd be capable of *anything*. She may have had him stabbed! That reminds me: you've met her?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"To tell me what she was like, of course! How you got on—what have you got out of her?"

Jack felt suddenly antagonistic to Juliet. "I was with Mademoiselle Pavoya about twenty minutes at most, and her manager was there, too," he said. "I got nothing out of her. What did you expect? All the same you may take it from me,

Juliet, you'll make a big mistake if you imagine she has anything to do with Pat's not showing up. I'm sure she hasn't."

"Oh! She's hypnotized you, too, has she?" snapped Juliet. "*Pat* wanted to make me believe she was a *good woman!* Come with me into his study, and I'll show you something. Then perhaps you won't be so quick to defend her!"

This was worse than Jack's fears. He couldn't refuse to follow his cousin. From everyone's point of view, that would be poor policy. But he hated to go to Pat's study. He did not wish to see anything Juliet had to show him there.

"If it's a letter, I won't——" he had begun when she cut him short.

"It isn't a letter! After the scolding you gave me at the Lorne, I wouldn't glance at the *wildest* love-letter of Pavoya's even if she'd *printed* it so large I could read every word across the room."

"I didn't give you a scolding," Jack defended himself. "I only said a *man* wouldn't do what you did—or some such thing as that."

"Yes. That's just what you did say." Juliet was unlocking the door of Pat's study, of which she had the key.

"I never knew you not to do what you wanted to do because I or any one else scolded you!"

"How hard you are to me, Jack!" she reproached him. "This is different. And *I* am different. I

don't want to do anything a man would think mean. I want to be fair to Pat, whatever happens. But about the pearls I can't be fair to him and Pavoya both. I'm going to show you why not."

As she spoke she went to Pat's desk, where things were wildly scattered, as in his notorious carelessness he had left them. Jack Manners' heart beat rather thickly as he remembered his last visit to this room: how Defasquelle had come in; how he, Jack, had sat on the club fender, very conscious during the scene which followed that Lyda Pavoya must be hidden behind the curtains or the screen; how he had advised Pat to do what Defasquelle asked; how Pat refused, and showed the safe in the wall which was already open.

"Here's his seal ring," Juliet was saying. "I found it lying on the desk. This is what I brought you in to see. Now take the ring in your hand, please. Look at it closely, and tell me if you notice anything odd."

As Jack took the ring, he recalled that Pat had pulled it off his finger and given it to Defasquelle, telling the Frenchman to compare it with the seals on the packet. Relieved that, for a moment, Juliet was letting Lyda's name rest in peace, he examined the ring.

"I see nothing peculiar, unless a tiny bit of red stuff stuck in the corner of the eye," he said.

"Ah!" cried Juliet, "I thought you'd see that! What do you think the red stuff is?"

"Might be sealing-wax."

"That's just what it is. I used a magnifying-glass to make sure. Which showed me something else, too. But I haven't quite come to that yet! Pat never seals his letters with red wax. He dislikes red things: you know yourself he always uses grey-blue wax. He said it reminded him of my eyes! You saw the packet Defasquelle brought from France?"

"Yes."

"Then you know it was sealed with five red seals. I have the box and wrappings upstairs, if you don't remember."

"I do remember."

"Very well. You can guess what I'm driving at?"

"I suppose I can."

"Good! Now for the other thing the magnifying-glass told me. But no—take it yourself. There's a scratch across the eye on the ring. You see it?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who was supposed to have sealed up the packet?"

"Mayen, of course: with a duplicate ring Pat had made for him on purpose."

"Yes, a duplicate. But *would the scratch have been copied?* It shows on all five seals of the packet. I looked through the magnifier."

"Juliet! You accuse Pat——"

“Or Pavoya. I said it must lie between him and her.”

Jack did not answer at once. He saw the sinister importance of this discovery which Juliet had made. His mind rushed back to yesterday. Lyda Pavoya had been left alone in the study, for how long he did not know. But Pat had given her a chance to get away. He had made an excuse to show both men something in the Chinese room next door. Then, when Defasquelle pleaded an engagement, Pat had rung for Togo to guide the Frenchman out. A little later Jack also had gone. What Pat had done after that, who could tell? His own man Nickson, perhaps, or one of the other servants. Jack pushed the name of Lyda Pavoya violently out of his mind. He would not ask himself what she knew about Pat's next movements and about the red seals.

When these thoughts had shot through his head, bringing actual bodily pain, he drew a long breath, and forced himself to speak. Juliet was waiting! “It's very necessary to have a detective to tackle this business,” he said. “I realize that fact more than ever now. It's essential for Pat's own sake, if—for no one else's. A sharp chap may be able somehow or other to pulverize this beastly theory you're forming, Juliet. He'll make tests for fingerprints on the safe in the wall. If there are others besides Pat's, of course——”

“And Lyda Pavoya's!”

"It's not worthy of you to spring to such conclusions!" Manners broke out before he could control himself. He expected Juliet to retort furiously, but she did not. She merely looked piteous—and young.

"Jack," she said, sadly, "what am I going to do if that woman takes *you* away from me as well as Pat?"

"Nonsense," he bluffed. "I hope I shall show that she hasn't taken Pat—or anything of yours. You don't *want* her proved guilty, I suppose?"

"Not unless she is. But I'd rather it would be Pavoya than Pat. And it seems as if it must be one or the other."

"It seems so to *you*—now. But wait."

Juliet looked at him anxiously. "Can you think of any one else to suspect?"

"I haven't had much time to think yet," said Jack. "To-morrow morning early, I'll get the best private detective in town: one who won't talk. Meanwhile, we must be patient. I suppose, of course, you've questioned Nickson about his master?"

"That was one of the first things I did. Poor old Nick was almost bowled over when I said I feared that something had happened to his adored one. I didn't mention the pearls—naturally!—or that I thought Pat might have disappeared of his own accord. I watched Nick's face to see what he *knew*. I don't think he has an idea where Pat has gone. But—Jack, *he knows something*—something wild horses

wouldn't drag out of him. I feel—I have a *flair*—it's about Pavoya. I've an idea Nick has taken messages. Togo has been bribed by her, too, I'm sure. And he won't speak. The woman is like Circe, with men of all sorts and classes. She has but to look at them to turn them into beasts!"

"The woman" had looked at Jack. But she had not turned him into a beast. He had never felt less like a beast in his life than he felt at this moment! Yet—saint or Circe—by some magic she had won his loyalty. "Wild horses" would not have dragged her secrets from Nickson, Juliet said, and Jack believed she might be right. As for him, he would have had his tongue cut out sooner than tell his cousin that he was engaged to sup at Lyda's house. And it was almost time to go!

What excuse could he make for leaving Juliet abruptly, without hurting her? He would not hurt her for a great deal. But he would hurt her if he must, rather than be late!

CHAPTER XIV

SUPPER AT TWELVE

THE house taken furnished by Lyda Pavoya belonged to a woman well known in society, who had gone abroad. Jack Manners had visited there before the war; but the drawing room was changed. There had been banal things in it. Now they were gone. Banality could not exist near Lyda. It seemed that in every form it must shrivel up, burnt away by the still fire of her strange, secret soul.

Jack had pictured himself entering a room full of people, fellow guests, and finding no one, he feared that he had come too soon. If stage stars invited one for midnight, they probably meant one to turn up at half-past twelve, so that, if they sailed in at one o'clock, one would not be annoyed. When the door opened five minutes after his arrival, therefore, he expected to see some theatrical or social "swell." But it was Lyda who appeared—alone.

He had never met her off the stage until yesterday, at the door of the Phayre house. Then she had been dressed in black, and thickly veiled. He had guessed her identity from the extreme grace and slinness

of her tall figure, and the flame of her red hair glimpsed through embroidered net. In Paris, where she had danced, he had sat too far away to criticise her features, and at the theatre to-night he'd been dazzled by the wonder of her as a swan-woman.

Now, as she drifted in with the air of a tired, overworked girl needing rest, and mutely asking for help in securing it, Jack had the thrill of a new revelation. How many sides had this Polish dancer's nature? Was he to have a different sort of thrill each time he met her, always more poignant, more soul-piercing than before?

"I am glad to see you," she said. "I thought I should be here first. I hope I've not kept you waiting?"

"Not five minutes," Jack assured her.

"Good! Will you take off my wrap for me? When I heard you had come I wouldn't wait for my maid."

She had unfastened the emerald clasps of a long, oddly shaped cloak of purple velvet lined with clouds of green chiffon over gold.

As Jack lifted it from her white shoulders, to his surprise he heard himself exclaim, "I'd imagined you in sables." (What right had he to make a "personal" comment like that?)

"So other people have told me," she said. "But I have one peculiarity: I never wear furs. To me it is horrible that women can cover themselves with

the skins of lovely creatures murdered for their pleasure: pathetic little faces and feet and tails dangling all over them! No. When I was a child I suffered too much from the cruelty of the strong to the weak to find joy in profiting from it."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Jack. "I've thought sometimes of that sort of thing. But I didn't suppose it ever occurred to women, even the tenderest ones I've known."

"The women you have known haven't had childhoods like mine," said Lyda. "Yet I hoped you'd not be one to make fun of my feeling. Another thing: I do not eat meat for the same reason. You will see, at supper. But you shall have some, so don't be discouraged!"

As she spoke, she smiled, and Jack realized that it was the first time he had seen her smile. That was strange! Or, it would have been strange in another woman. Now he saw that it would be more strange, altogether out of keeping with this character voluntarily opening itself to him, if she laughed or smiled often.

Jack had obeyed a gesture of hers, and laid the faintly perfumed cloak on a sofa. Lyda wore a dress simple enough for the first dinner-gown of a schoolgirl: grey and short—almost "skimpy," yet somehow perfect, without a single touch of trimming or a jewel. "Shall we go into the dining room?" she asked. "Supper will be ready. It always is.

I never have it announced unless I've a party. To-night it's only you and me. You'll not mind?"

"Mind!" The word spoke itself with a boyish sincerity that Jack could not have pretended. "I didn't dare dream——"

She led the way through open sliding doors to an adjoining room, not turning her head to listen as she let Jack push the half-drawn portières aside. What a divine back she had, and what dimples in the delicate, flat shoulder-blades! An almost overpowering desire gripped Jack to kiss the white neck just where a knot of shining red hair was kept in place by a jade pin. He would no more have ventured upon a liberty with this creature of unfathomed reserves than he would have thrown himself into the cage of a tigress. All the same, he had definitely "lost his head." He knew that he would have sacrificed Juliet and Pat for this girl, not deliberately, not through conviction, but because he couldn't help himself if it came to a choice!

In the octagon-shaped room where its late mistress had given famous dinners for eight—never less, never more—a small table was laid and lit with shaded candles, but no servants were there. Violets were scattered on the lace table-cover, the only flower decorations. For the guest there were several elaborate cold dishes and champagne in ice; for the hostess, brown bread and a jug of milk! When she saw Jack look at this, Lyda laughed out aloud.

"I never take anything else at night," she explained. "I suppose I'm a queer person. Probably you're thinking me odd in many ways: for one, to have you alone with me at supper. I've a companion who lives with me, Madame Lemercier, a nice woman. But I do what I wish without thinking of conventions, if I hurt no one. People say so many things about me, they can say no worse, whatever I do! That's partly why I act as I please. Yet I think I'd do the same without an excuse. I invited you because I want to talk with you alone; no Madame Lemercier; no servants. I'll wait on you myself."

"Not that!" said Manners. "You must let me wait on you!"

"We'll wait on each other," she smiled.

A sense of exquisite intimacy with this girl, or woman (he knew not what to call her) took possession of Jack. For a few minutes they ate, and he talked of anything that flashed into his mind. When Lyda had finished her milk he jumped up, and filled the glass again. Then she said abruptly: "I recognized you, at the theatre—from *yesterday*. Did you think I would?"

"No!" Jack reddened to his sun-bleached hair.

"But—you must have known I was in Claremanagh's study when—you were there."

"I—wasn't sure."

"Yet you thought so! You're not a man who

can lie well. And you are the cousin of Claremanagh's wife. You thought badly of me."

"I'd no right to think badly," Jack staved her off. "It wasn't my affair!"

"I asked you here to-night to *make* it your affair."

Jack had a shock of disappointment. That wonderful, heart-piercing first look of hers which he had read, "You are *the* man: I am *the* woman!" hadn't meant much after all.

"You see," Lyda went on, "I think that perhaps you and I have known each other a long time: in another life: perhaps in more lives than one. Souls that have been friends—or more than friends—group together on earth many times, no doubt. Did you feel this when we met to-night?"

"Yes!" Jack said, his breath choked. "I know it must have been that. I knew even then it was the most wonderful thing ever!"

"I felt it even yesterday, when I passed you at Claremanagh's door," she told him. "I thought: 'There's a man I may never see again, but we could be friends, and we *have* been friends, though maybe he has forgotten.' When I was in the study behind the curtains—Claremanagh put me there: he didn't want me seen—I was sorry you should believe things not true."

"I did not!" Jack protested.

"No? Then—I am glad."

The man felt ashamed, remembering suddenly

what he *had* believed yesterday—even to-day. Her words, "I am glad," cut him to the quick, and he hurried on along the way of atonement. "You say you asked me here to 'make it my affair'—about Claremanagh. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

"I don't know yet what is best. We will talk it over," she answered. "But first you will have to hear a story. It's a long story: how I met Claremanagh, and a great many things that came of the meeting. You won't be bored?"

"Do you need an answer to that question?"

Lyda gave him one of her rare smiles. "No. It was conventional of me to ask. But—it will not be conventional to tell you the story. It would be—even *dangerous* to tell it to some men. I'm not afraid with you."

"Thank you for saying that!"

She held out her hand to him across the small round table. Jack seized it, and pressed it closely instead of kissing the pink palm as he was tempted to do.

For a moment Lyda sat still, her eyes cast down, as if she sought for words which eluded her. Then she began in a low voice that was slightly monotonous, as though she spoke out of an old dream. She paused sometimes; but Manners remained silent, asking no questions. He felt that she would prefer this.

She took him back with her to Petrograd (St. Petersburg then) when she was sixteen, ten years before. She was dancing in a second-rate café, and attracted attention, so that the place became popular. A man named Konrad Markoff was the real owner, though he posed as an amateur patron. By his advice, the manager got Lyda to sign a hard and fast contract to dance at the same salary for the next five years. Markoff pretended a fatherly kindness for her; and she was invited occasionally to visit his wife, a Frenchwoman who had lived for years in England.

One night Markoff brought a good-looking English boy of nineteen or so to the café. This boy applauded Lyda's dancing, and was introduced to her at his own request: The Duke of Claremanagh. From the first he was enthusiastic about her talent: not in love ("oh, not at all in love!" Lyda insisted), but anxious to "help a budding genius." At the end of a week he had thought out a practical plan. He would pay for the dancing lessons of which she had dreamed, as of an impossible Paradise: lessons from the great Sophia Verasova. It would cost a lot, yes, but he'd just had a few unexpected thousands left to him by an aunt. If Lyda wouldn't accept, they were sure to be spent on some foolery. She did accept. Perhaps, she might have accepted even if Claremanagh hadn't made it quite clear how impersonal, how disinterested were his motives!

Never—the dancer confessed—had she met a

“good man” in those days. She would have made an idol of this handsome boy; but he didn’t want her idolatry. He was fancying himself in love with the wife of a Don at Oxford just then!

To free her from slavery at the café, Claremanagh paid a big indemnity; and at the time Lyda was grateful to Markoff for arranging the business, not then aware that he was the power behind the throne. It was nearly two years later when the truth was sprung upon the girl, just as she expected to go with Verasova to make her *début* in Paris. Markoff had wished her to be educated and become a great dancer without expense to himself. There were several ways in which she could be valuable, and unless she promised her services to him, he would prevent her from leaving Petrograd.

Claremanagh had been too carelessly trustful to have the release from her contract framed in a legal document, and Lyda could still be compelled to carry it out. Unless she agreed to use the charm she had, the fame she might win, in the secret service of Russia, she *would* be thus compelled!

Lyda was not old enough to understand the hideousness of this bargain. She wasn’t yet eighteen; and not to go with Verasova would have seemed worse than death. It was only later, when she had soared to brilliant success, that she realized fully what she was expected to do. Engagements were offered to her in the capitals of different countries: after Paris,

Rome, and then London. She met many men of distinction, sailors, soldiers, diplomats, financiers. She was to flirt with these men—just how seriously, was her own affair!—and get them inadvertently to tell her things useful to the Tsar's government.

Well, she *had* flirted! But she had sickened at the business behind the flirtations. Very little information reached Russia through Lyda Pavoya! Reproaches and threats came to her from Markoff; and as a warning of what he could do to bring about her ruin if he chose, Russians in England, France, Italy, America, set the ball of scandal rolling against her. According to them she was a professional siren, a mercenary blood-sucker, a "tigress woman," a devourer of men's happiness and honour! Against such a campaign a woman, placed as she was, found herself helpless. She could only shrug her shoulders, go her own way, and try not to care!

But the war, like an ill wind that blows good to some, changed the world for Lyda. She worked heart and soul in Paris for the Red Cross. The Russian Revolution broke like a red sunrise and with the end of Tsardom she hoped that Markoff's power over her would end also. For some months she had no word from him. Then he appeared in Paris—at a bad moment for her.

Claremanagh had been there on leave. He had come to her house, complaining that he felt ill. At luncheon he had fallen from his chair in a dead faint.

The doctor had pronounced the attack a virulent case of influenza. Claremanagh couldn't be moved. Lyda, helped by Madame Lemercier, had nursed him. He thought she had saved his life—vowed that he owed her more than she had ever owed him. There was endless gossip, of course, but Lyda had been so glad to repay her debt of gratitude that she hadn't much cared.

It was soon after Claremanagh had gone back to the front, and while people were still coupling their names in a scandalous way, that Konrad Markoff arrived in Paris.

"At last the time has come when you can be of real use to me," he had said.

Lyda had hoped that this was "bluff." But Markoff explained. He explained things of which she had never dreamed.

With brutal frankness he told the girl that he had made Claremanagh's acquaintance in Petrograd for a very special purpose. He had married his French wife because she had been maid to the young Duchess of Claremanagh, and knew something about the famous pearls. Always he, and men associated with him, had kept track of the family fortunes. He had known that the boy intended to visit the scene of his ancestor's great romance. Had it not been for some treachery (he believed that his own wife had sent anonymous warnings to the Claremanaghs) the lost treasure would long ago have returned to

Russia. Now, though his associates were dead or in Bolshevik prisons, and the crown was a legend, he—Markoff—wanted the pearls for himself.

Lyda had more than repaid Claremanagh's generosity, all of which, Markoff argued, she owed directly to *him*. She was in a position to demand any favour she liked of the Duke. She must get him to lend her the Tsarina pearls. If she refused to do this, she should be denounced as a spy. Even though her activities had been stopped by the revolution, the war was still on! Markoff had letters which would convict her. She—the adored one, the divine dancer—would be tried and shot some morning at dawn.

It would be nothing to die, Lyda had thought. But she loved France. She could not bear to die as a traitor! What to do then? Suddenly a plan came to her. She agreed to ask Claremanagh for the pearls.

“You see,” she explained to Manners, “Markoff had had a copy made, from an old portrait of the Tsarina. He meant me to hand him over the real pearls, and give the false to Claremanagh. But he didn't know that Claremanagh's mother had had them copied. Hardly any one did know. But Claremanagh had told me. And it was that copy I asked him to lend! He couldn't bear to refuse my very first request. Poor fellow, he hated to grant it, though! It was just after he'd fallen in love with

Miss Phayre—before they were engaged. There was enough talk about him and me, without my wearing those well-known pearls. It was part of my bargain with Markoff to appear with them in public, for he wanted my name to be coupled with Claremanagh's. It would give me more power over his future. And even if the Duke told people that he was lending me a copy, they wouldn't believe it. They would have laughed at the idea of Pavoya accepting false pearls.

“Claremanagh sent to London for the things. My wearing them made a sensation! Markoff was wild with rage when he saw what they were—wild against Claremanagh, not me. He believed that I'd been tricked. Of course the copy was of no use to him. He did not take it. But he would not let me give it back to the Duke. He was working up a scheme of blackmail against us both. I dared not disobey—and once the mischief was done by my wearing the rope Claremanagh didn't much mind whether I kept it or not. I pretended to forget, and he didn't mention the subject. Then I got this surprise offer to dance in New York. I was *so* glad! I thought I might get rid of Markoff. How foolish! He sailed in the ship with the Duke and Duchess, but kept out of their way. Claremanagh never knew he was on board—and perhaps wouldn't have remembered him from those old Petrograd days if he had seen his face.

"Now, we come to these last few weeks in New York," Lyda finished. "Do you begin to see Markoff's game?"

"Not quite," Jack answered. It was the first time he had spoken since she began her story. "It isn't clear to me yet—at least where Pat Claremanagh's concerned."

"It wasn't to me at first. But Markoff made it clear. He didn't try direct blackmail against the Duke. He was afraid, I think, that Claremanagh would fight—even though he'd hate scandal for his wife's sake. I was the catspaw. Markoff really did have letters which I had sent him in those hateful days when I had to content him with a pretense of spying. There were always those to hold over my head. And he threatened to order the wearing of those wretched false pearls again as an open insult to the Duchess. He thought that, for answer, she would wear the real ones! Then he would be sure they were in New York, and he might have the chance at last which he'd been trying for all these years: the chance to steal them."

"By Jove, you are unravelling the whole mystery!" Jack broke out. But Lyda shook her head. "No! I'm afraid you'll not think that when you've heard what's to come," she said. "I'm afraid I shall make the mystery even deeper. I was faced with shame for myself and the ruin of Claremanagh's happiness—through my fault—my seeming selfishness. The

alternative was money—oh, but a great sum of money—enough to console Markoff for giving up his hope of the pearls. Never till then had I told Claremanagh of Markoff's tyranny. But for his own sake and mine I had to explain something. We consulted—about what was best to be done. Claremanagh wished to do what he called 'wave the red flag.' But I made him realize what his wife's feelings would be if he were mixed up in such a case at law, with *me*. At last we agreed that it would be wise to pay Markoff and be free of him. I earn a great deal of money, and—spend it. It took some time to get the sum together. I sold nearly all my jewels, and what I didn't sell, I pawned. Still there wasn't enough, and Claremanagh came to the rescue. He said it was for *himself*—but of course it was far more for me! It was only when the money was every *sou* in hand that I dared give back the imitation pearls. I went to do that when you met me at the door: to do that and to hand Claremanagh two thirds of the hush-money for Markoff. The rest he had ready in his safe. He offered—he wanted—to meet the man and exchange the money for the letters. Now, Captain Manners, you know the whole history of the 'Pavoya'-Claremanagh affair. But perhaps you don't yet understand all the reasons why I've told it, two hours after we were introduced to each other—you and I!"

Her eyes challenged him. Jack saw that she

wished him to understand, and so he did not mean to make a mistake. He thought before he spoke.

"I wonder?" he said. "I could be more sure where I am if I knew whether you're in the secret of Pat's doings to-night."

Lyda looked puzzled and pale. "His doings—to-night? No, last night he saw Markoff and got back the letters. But to-night's doings—no. I am not in the secret—if there is a secret."

Jack caught at her words. He was intensely excited by what she had told him, but he kept his outward coolness. Lyda had gone through a great strain. He did not care to alarm her needlessly.

"You say Pat saw Markoff, and got the letters. You're sure of that?"

"Yes, he sent me the letters with a short note, just after receiving them, saying 'all was right.'"

"Did the note come from home?"

"No, from a club: the 'Grumblers'. It was written rather late."

"Didn't Pat say anything about himself—where he was going from the club, what had happened since you met, or what he meant to do to-day?"

"Nothing—except that he was writing in a hurry after 'settling up with Markoff' and seeing the last of him, for he had 'something rather important to do.' That was all, absolutely all. Captain Manners, you look strange! What have you to tell me in exchange for my story?"

"Why, to begin with, that I don't understand as I thought I did, why you've told it," Jack stammered. "I imagined it was because you knew Pat and my cousin had quarrelled, that he had left her—or anyhow disappeared—and you wanted me to justify you with Juliet."

Lyda stared at him across the table, her hands suddenly pressed over her heart. "*Mon Dieu!*" she whispered. "Claremanagh disappeared!"

"But," went on Jack, collecting his wits, "if you didn't know, what did you mean when you said that Markoff's hand in the pearl business didn't clear up the mystery, but only made it more mysterious?"

"I meant, of course, those innuendos in that horrible paper—the hints that the Duchess was wearing false pearls. It is not to Markoff's advantage to start such a rumour now. He has nothing to gain—no longer any hold over Claremanagh or me. He would do himself no good, but much harm. Oh, Captain Manners, where can the Duke be?"

"I came here to-night racking my brains vainly as to that," Jack encouraged her. "Now, thanks to you, I've something to go upon, something to tell the detective whom I shall see first thing to-morrow. This Markoff is my starting point now: his scheme of years to steal the pearls. How he can have got into the house, opened the safe, taken the things out of the box, and sealed it up again with the false pearls inside, I can't see yet, but——"

Lyda sprang to her feet. "You say—he has done *that!*"

"Someone has done that. You—Pat didn't tell you in his letter, about what had happened to the box you must have seen?"

"No—no. He didn't mention the pearls—or the box. Who discovered the theft?"

"Juliet. Pat gave her the sealed packet, and—she's rather an expert!—she found the pearls were false."

"Yet—she wore them."

"Yes."

"Then that was because she thought I——"

"Don't say it!"

"Can *you* say it wasn't her thought?"

"She's accused her own husband—whom she adores."

"Or me! Was that not it?"

Jack was silent.

With a little cry Lyda covered her face with her hands, and he saw that she trembled. Hardly knowing what he did he went to her, took the two cold hands and held them to his lips. She looked up to him with eyes bright with tears, and—the next instant she was in his arms.

"We'll work together," he said, "you and I. We'll drag this mystery up by the roots. We'll find Pat, wherever he is, and Juliet shall beg your pardon on her knees."

CHAPTER XV

THE FORTUNE TELLER

MANNERS did not go to his hotel when he left Lyda. He walked for miles. He was happy. He was proud. He was wretched. He was ashamed. He believed in Lyda Pavoya. He doubted her. There would not have been room for the volcano of his feelings between four walls.

That moment when he had held her in his arms had been the most wonderful if not the greatest in his life. But it had been only a moment. Her surrender for a few seconds had seemed to him then the most exquisite thing in the world: the childlike longing for a man's chivalrous protection, in the heart of a woman who had known little chivalry! In an instant she had drawn herself gently away, and he had not held her. He had wished Lyda to know that, if he did not understand everything, at least he understood why she had crept into his arms for that brief breathing space, and that he would take no advantage of her yielding.

He had armoured himself with an almost exaggerated friendliness afterward; and for a while they had talked not at all of themselves, but of Juliet

and Pat. They tried to form some theory which might account for the disappearance of the pearls from the locked safe whose combination was known to only two persons; the replacing of the parcel there, sealed with fresh seals. They had striven to implicate Markoff in the affair, but all their deductions stumbled against the same blank wall in the end. It seemed impossible that Markoff could even have entered the house, much less have got into the study or opened the safe. Lyda did not know how Pat had obtained the money to help her out with the payment to Markoff. It had not seemed strange to her that he should have it. Looking back, it seemed strange now. Yet it was incredible that he should have juggled with the packet, and risked losing his wife's respect by palming off false pearls on her, in order to get money for another woman.

Incredible! And yet, Lyda said, like one in a dream, that he was the only person who could have done the thing—*except herself!*

"I know *I* didn't do it, and—yes, I know he didn't do it!" she cried to Jack. So, again and again they came through darkness to that blank wall! And at last, deadly tired in body and brain, Lyda sent Manners away.

He was all exaltation at first. The glamour and perfume of her ran through his veins. She was noble, magnificent. It was great of this glowing creature to trust him so generously, to tell him her life story,

putting herself in his power in a way, for the sake of Claremanagh's happiness. It was fine of her to say he might repeat all to Juliet, who—Lyda must know—detested and distrusted her with the obstinacy of a spoiled, jealous child: to say that, if necessary, a detective might be trusted with her secrets.

But as the chill of the night iced his veins, Jack's mood changed. Juliet's point of view suddenly showed itself sharply to his eyes. It was as if she had come from round the corner of the last street he had passed, to walk with him. *Had* Lyda told him the story for Claremanagh's sake and Juliet's? *Why not for her own*—in the daring wish to make a "friend at court?" Would that not be more like her—more like the woman she was supposed to be?

She knew that he had seen her go into the Phayre house; that he must have guessed she was hidden in the study; that he was Juliet's cousin and would naturally be inclined to work for Juliet's interest. Would it not be a bold and clever stroke to win him to her side?

If it were some other man, not himself, whose prejudices had been thus broken down in an hour by a woman's eyes and voice, wouldn't he pity the poor idiot who believed that he alone fathomed the depths of her smile?

Lyda practically admitted that she had fooled many men. Some of them had doubtless known far more about women than he knew. Why, she must

have been laughing at him all through! He had been a child in her hands!

Lies that were half truths could be welded into a fabric hard to break down. No doubt there were true details in that life history of Pavoya. But how many true ones? And *was* it "fine" of her to "consent" that he should tell Juliet, and if necessary a detective? Wasn't that just what she'd worked up to, and wanted? Wasn't she purposely turning suspicion toward Pat when she said, as if dazed, that only he or she could have changed the pearls?

Jack heard himself again, warmly promising that they two should work together, that they'd drag up the mystery by the roots, and that Juliet should beg her pardon.

A spider's dainty web of opal-gauze, glittering with dew, must look a fairy palace to a big, blundering bluebottle!

Did such a man as Markoff from Petrograd even *exist*?

Dawn flowed like a pale river through the canyons of the New York streets when Manners' walk ended at his own hotel.

He felt as if he had been through a battle—a battle that he hadn't won. But a cold splash, and then dead sleep for an hour, braced him physically. He woke with a start, as if somebody had knocked; yet no one was at the door. The thought of food dis-

gusted him; hot, strong black coffee, however, was refreshing.

It was early still, yet he was sure that Juliet would be awake, and called her up, learning at once that she had no news. Yes, he *had* things to tell, he answered her eager question. "Not news exactly, but important." Before going to her, however, he intended to see the detective they'd talked about: a man named Henry Sanders—used to be in the police—sharp chap; had the nickname of "Hawkeye Harry"; retired, but got bored with doing nothing, and started as a private detective; had made a big success in the last few years; absolutely to be trusted: silent as the grave and sharp as a razor.

Jack added that he knew the man personally, and as he didn't wish to wait for office hours, would ring Sanders up at his own house. He would call there and tell the man something of the case to save Juliet useless questions and answers. Then, he hoped, they could both come round to see her.

As it turned out, however, Manners went alone to the Phayre house. He had not seen Sanders. The detective (to whom Jack had vainly tried to 'phone the night before) had not yet returned from the country where he had spent the last few days. He had luckily left word that he would be at his office by ten o'clock; and having sent a request for an immediate appointment there, Jack was ready for a talk with his cousin.

It was hard to put Lyda Pavoya's case impersonally and impartially to Juliet. As he framed the story in his own words, he saw Lyda again as he had seen her last night, heard her sweet, vibrating voice with its delicious accent. The glamour of the woman took possession of him once more. He tried to be judicial, but he could be so only in manner. Telling the tale, he was impressed with the way detail after detail fitted itself into probability; and as Juliet's face showed how the door of her mind shut against Lyda, his own opened. He had left Lyda, and had become her judge. Juliet's silent antagonism made him again Lyda Pavoya's defender.

"I don't believe one word!" Juliet flamed out, when he had finished.

Manners found himself quite unreasonably angry: he, who had walked the streets raging against his own weakness for Pavoya!

"You wanted me to get her story," he said. "Well, I've *got* it, and all you have to say is that it's a pack of lies. I can do no more."

Juliet felt stricken. "Do you mean you take it all as gospel truth yourself?" she challenged.

"It seems to me to hang together perfectly."

"It *would*! She's clever as—a serpent."

Jack frowned. "You don't seem pleased to have your own husband turned into a hero instead of a villain."

Colour flew to Juliet's pale cheeks. "I don't need Lyda Pavoya to do that for me!"

"Then," said Manners, coolly, "you make this distinction. You believe the good part about Pat, and not the good part about her."

Juliet broke into tears. "Oh, Jack," she reproached him. "I might have known! You've gone over absolutely to the enemy!"

Jack was conscience-stricken, for in a way it was true. He tried to console the girl as he had consoled her yesterday, and in the old days when she was a child. There was *no* "enemy," he said, or at all events the enemy wasn't Mademoiselle Pavoya. It was essential that they should at least seem to work in harmony. Juliet must trust him. She must pull herself together, and be ready soon to see the detective.

The Duchess was quieter when he had argued for a while, and patted her shoulder, and called her "darling child." She dried her tears, and promised to "be good"—but when Jack had gone to keep his appointment at Sanders' office, her heart was lead. "He's Pavoya's man now!" she said to herself.

Having Lyda's permission to speak, and knowing Sanders to be trustworthy, Manners kept nothing back. He began with a brief outline of the history of the pearls, and Pat's business transaction with Mayen. This brought him to the arrival of the

messenger with the packet, and its delivery in his own presence. There, for the first time, Sanders stopped him and asked questions: what had been Defasquelle's manner, what the Duke's? And Jack believed that his answers impressed the detective favourably toward the Frenchman. It proved the messenger's bona fides that he had insisted upon the opening of the box in his presence. Besides, after the theft, it appeared certain that the new seals had been made with the Duke's ring; and before that could have happened, Manners had seen Defasquelle leave the house.

Sanders would, of course, wish to meet Defasquelle, but would prefer to talk with the Duchess first of all. Whether Mademoiselle Pavoya's version of her visit to the Phayre house and her acquaintance with the Duke were true, remained to be seen. Sanders had never heard of Markoff, but would take immediate steps through the aid of his "best boys" to find out all about the man—if he existed! As for the Duke, the detective didn't mind admitting to Jack as a friend—not in an official capacity—that he didn't yet believe there had been foul play. He wasn't sure that, in Claremanagh's place (assuming his injured innocence) *he* wouldn't have gone away to punish his wife.

"These spoiled heiresses are the limit when they get going!" he said. "And this Duke chap's Irish. I'm Irish myself. We fellows can't sit still when

even the prettiest woman forgets the Marquis of Queensberry's rules in a scrap! It gets our goat!"

Jack was not sure whether Juliet would prefer an outside opinion that Pat had been kidnapped, or had left her of his own free will. But the girl's pale beauty bowled Sanders over at first sight. His prejudice against the "spoiled heiress" melted like ice in morning sunlight, and his Irish heart—as well as his trained discretion—kept back any word which he thought might wound her. The assumption (meant to be comforting) that with Markoff lay the clue to the mystery, was, however, salt on an unhealed scar for Juliet. She took it instantly for granted that Sanders agreed with Jack in believing Lyda Pavoya had told the truth.

"They're going the wrong way to work!" she thought, bitterly, when the two men had gone, promising a report the moment there should be news of any sort. "The wrong way! . . . If they find out where Pat is, it will be just blundering—by accident!"

In thwarted wretchedness, the girl realized that it would be worse than useless to make such protests to Sanders. *He* was the detective, not she—though he had complimented her upon her "smartness" in the matter of the ring and the magnifying-glass. He would only pity and despise her for jealousy and prejudice if she gave him the advice she burned to give. And Jack—Jack was *hopeless!* He was lost to her.

She felt as miserably alone as if Jack had not promised to be her "knight," and as if he had not brought to her one of the best private detectives in the land. She longed to strike out on her own account, to be first in the field, and be able to say to these men: "See, while you were wandering all round Robin Hood's barn, *I've* found the place where the secret was buried, and dug it up!"

It was mostly about Pat that Juliet thought, and his disappearance. Upon the pearls she wasted little anxiety, though she hated to think that Pavoya should have them. She had cried out to Pat that she believed not one word of the dancer's story: and she had meant it at the time; but brooding alone over the history of Pavoya's years, and the link between her and Pat, Juliet found herself almost arbitrarily accepting certain details here and there. Yes, that must have been the way those two first met! Pat had told her that he had heard the call of romance in Russia—his great-great-grandfather's romance—and had left Oxford to spend the long vacation among those scenes. How like Pat at nineteen to create a romance of his own on the same spot!

Her heart yearned to Pat with the thought that he had helped Pavoya because of *charity*, not love. In that case he had told the truth—or as much truth as his wife could expect of a man where women were concerned. But certainly, Juliet assured her-

self, Pavoya had loved Pat and moved heaven and earth to compromise him. That was really why she'd asked him to lend her the pearls. No doubt she'd begged for the real ones, and he'd lent her the copy. She'd kept the wretched beads, not because of some melodramatic blackmail "stunt," but because she wished to wear them as if they were real, and get herself talked about with Pat. Then, he'd married, and having sent to France for the true pearls for his wife, he couldn't leave the false ones knocking about for Pavoya to play with. He'd practically ordered the woman to return them; and in revenge, when an amazing chance came her way, Pavoya had somehow stolen the genuine rope, changing the contents of the packet!

It all seemed clearer and clearer to Juliet, and she wondered that a man with such good brains as Jack's could be so easily deceived. In pride of her own superior talent as a detective, the girl would have had moments of triumphant joy had it not been for her wearing anxiety about Pat.

Days passed. Pat did not return or write to Juliet or the bank. And no news of importance was obtained for her by Sanders or Jack. Markoff the detective was unable to trace by name, though he had got upon the track of a Russian who had lately arrived in New York with some good introductions. His description answered that given of Konrad Markoff by Mademoiselle Pavoya. Boris Halbin

(who had figured at various New York clubs, and was now supposed to have sailed for France) was a person of inconspicuous appearance. So, too, was Markoff. Many Russians over forty are "darkish, stoutish, big faced, blunt featured, with beards turning grey!"

Juliet bravely kept up the fiction with her friends that she and Pat were on the best of terms. He was away on business for the bank. He would soon return. That story about the pearls being false was too silly for words! The reason she'd stopped wearing them was because she had broken the string, and didn't want the responsibility of choosing the person to mend it till Pat came back. The girl would have given thousands of dollars for the privilege of "sporting her oak," and refusing to see the many people whose devotion she attributed to curiosity. But for the sake of the future, and her own pride's sake, she would not do that. She went out a good deal, kept all her engagements, and made new ones. Her nerves, however, revenged themselves upon her mercilessly. Once she had hardly realized that she possessed such things as nerves. Now they made themselves felt each moment of the day, and through hours of the long, restless nights.

Against his will, Sanders had consented to an advertisement appearing in the "personal" column of several papers. Juliet had pleaded that no one would know for whom it was meant, and—she

should *die* if she couldn't put it in! Consequently, curious eyes in many cities of the United States were reading every day this appeal:—"Play Boy: 'American Beauty' believes in you and wants you. Write or come back if you would not break her heart."

Who could guess that the Duchess of Claremanagh's pet name for the Duke was "Play Boy," and that he had sent her "American Beauty" roses every day since they were engaged, because it was the name he had found sweetest, most appropriate for her?

Yet, someone must have guessed: because in the *Inner Circle* (a week after the sensational pearl "Whisper") the secret was given away. No names were mentioned: yet none who knew the Claremanaghs could have avoided reading between the lines.

It was while Juliet sat with the paper in her hands, shamed, bewildered, almost stunned, that a sealed envelope was brought on a tray to her boudoir. Mechanically she opened it. Within was a visiting card, with something written upon it in pencil.

For an instant the girl's bruised brain could not find the Comtesse de Saintville in the index of her memory. Then, suddenly, she saw the woman, playing opposite her at some bridge table. Yes, of course, Lyda Pavoya's friend.

"Forgive my calling uninvited. I hope you can see me. I have something to say which may be important to you," the woman, whom Juliet vaguely disliked, had scribbled in French under her name.

Juliet thought for a minute, with the card in her hand. It seemed "pushing" of this person to come, and probably if she—Juliet—consented to see her, she would regret the weakness. Still, the one really important thing on earth was news of Pat. Madame de Saintville *might* know something! She might have quarrelled with Pavoya, and be ready to "give her away." "Bring the lady up here," the Duchess instructed Huji.

Presently the visitor was shown in; and Juliet, rising to receive her, towered like a tall young goddess over a small, smart creature, painted to look as pretty as she thought she ought to be.

"She'll begin to speak of Pavoya," Juliet thought. But she was mistaken.

"I have come on a very queer errand," were the Countess's first words, spoken with much throaty rolling of "rs". "Perhaps you will be angry. I made up my mind only to-day that it was my duty to call."

Her eyes darted to the *Inner Circle* which Juliet had just thrown aside, and quickly returned to a flower with which she herself was playing. But Juliet read that side-glance to mean—"After reading that paper to-day, I decided."

"When people tell one it's a duty to say or do something in particular, it's generally disagreeable," Juliet said, drily.

"Ah, this is an exception! It is not disagreeable at all—I hope. It is only—unusual," replied the

Comtesse de Saintville. "But I will not keep you in suspense. Have you ever heard of a palmist and fortune teller named Madame Venø?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure," answered Juliet, surprised.

"She is not—or rather she has not been—fashionable, I think," explained the other. "I have not lived long enough in New York to know these things. I happened to hear of her through a friend of mine (yours also, is it not?)—Mrs. Billee Lowndes. It was there I met you once. Mrs. Lowndes knew I was interested in the psychic things: crystal gazing, palmistry. She spoke of Madame Venø, who is supposed to be only a manicurist. Her real profession is a secret. It has to be! It seems that 'Madame Venø' is a name several women have used, like—one would say, a '*trade name*,' because they have hired the same rooms, or offices, and 'Madame Venø, Manicurist' is on a doorplate. That is odd, is it not? But the first Madame Venø died—or something. The present one is—ah, Duchess, she is *merveilleuse*. She has told me things about myself—but things only *le bon Dieu ou le diable* had in their knowledge! Naturally, I have been to her more than once. Last time she looked through her crystal. I do not know if that is forbidden by your law? *En tout cas*, she does it. The picture she saw must have been strange. It seemed to frighten her. When I asked some questions, she said the vision was not for me. It was for

another. Why it came, she could not tell unless that person was in my thoughts. Then, Duchess, she spoke your name. *The picture was for you.*"

"Really!" exclaimed Juliet. She pretended to be amused; but the woman's tone was meant to impress, and did impress, the girl in spite of herself. "What did the picture represent?"

"Madame Veno did not mention, except that it concerned the Duke. She felt it would be wrong to speak if not to you alone. She wished me to give you a message: to say, if you would come to her place, she would look again in the crystal, and tell you what she saw. I did not like to call on you. I am not long enough of your acquaintance. But to-day——"

"Don't be afraid to speak out what's in your thoughts," Juliet said with a painful smile. "You have read the *Inner Circle*. You think the disgusting 'Whisperer' is right! That the advertisement which people have been talking about is *mine*. Of course that's all nonsense! Please tell everybody you meet, who's interested in my affairs! But probably you meant to be kind. Anyhow, I think fortune tellers are great fun! I shall go to this one—some day soon: when I have time. You'll give me the address?"

"*Par coincidence*, Madame Veno is in the same building with that *journal des blagues*," replied the Countess. "It goes without saying that they have no connection, one with the other. It is a mere

accident. Mrs. Lowndes has told me that the first woman of that trade name, 'Madame Veno,' was really a manicurist: so it was necessary to have an office, and not be in a private house in some quiet street."

"I see," said Juliet. "I must thank you for coming. As Madame knows my name, she must know a good deal about me, so her 'pictures' won't be as exciting as if I went to her a stranger. But they may be amusing."

Her tone, though perfectly courteous, was meant to end the interview. Madame de Saintville rose. Juliet did the same, and rang. The moment she was alone, she ran to her bedroom and commanded Simone, who was there, to give her a hat and coat.

She had said she would go "some day" to Madame Veno. But she was going now—at once—at once!

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREY ROOM

PAT CLAREMANAGH floated in a grey sea, under a grey sky. It seemed to him that the grey sea and sky were part of some existence after death. He vaguely remembered that he had died. If it were not for the constant, heavy pain in his head, he thought that he could recall the whole incident.

Yes, that was the word—"incident". It hardly mattered now, and wasn't worth while racking his brain over. That tin hat of his was too tight—much too tight. But he was too weak to lift his hands and take it off. Strange, though, that he should be wearing it when he was dead!

He must have been killed in the war. Yet, how long ago the war seemed! He had thought that a great many things had happened to him after the war. No doubt they were part of this dream—this long, floating dream—after death. But they were not grey like the leaden sea and the sky that hung so low over his head. They were beautiful, colourful things. Just straining to remember brought rainbow flashes across his brain. Out of these lights a girl's face looked at him.

"Juliet!" he heard himself mutter, in a thick, tongue-tied voice.

Instantly another face appeared, and blotted out that of the girl. This one was solid and very real. It bent over him in the greyness: a man's face, somehow familiar, as if he had known it long ago—long ago disliked it: a fleshy bulk surrounded with hair. He loathed it for itself, and hated it for shutting out the vision of Juliet, so he closed his eyes.

For a moment consciousness died down like a fading flame. Only a vast, vague greyness was left, and the tight pain of the tin hat. But when a few moments or a few years had passed, a voice spoke. It beat upon his dulled intelligence like the strokes of a clock in the dark, telling an hour. Pat was suddenly keyed up to listening, because it was a woman's voice, and far down within himself he was aware that a woman's voice—a certain woman's voice—was what he yearned to hear.

Strange! He was wide awake, and knowledge came to him that he was not dead, after all, though he might be close to death. But he did not open his eyes, because he could not bear to see the living mass of flesh and hair again. He lay quite still. And he listened.

"You are always hanging over him like that whenever I turn my back!" said the woman.

"Why not? I do no harm," answered a man's voice, with a rather soft, monotonous foreign accent.

Pat knew that the voice belonged to the face. It also had association with long past things which were somehow important. A scene began forming in his tired mind, like bits of an old picture being matched together. A room with tables, and men drinking and smoking; a cleared space; a kind of stage; a girl dancing—slim, lovely, light as a fawn; long red hair waving back and forth—Lyda!—that was her name. Lyda—something. He was at one of the tables, very young, only a boy. And the hairy man sat with him, talking, praising the girl. Markoff!

He stopped, remembering, and listened again.

“You’d do harm if you dared to,” the woman said. “You’d like to kill him.”

“I tink it will be better for us all if he die,” said the man. “Much better! Much safer. But no violence. Let him go—fade away. I tought it would soon be finished wiz him. Zen he open his eyes and look at me. You hear him speak—some word.”

“Yes, I heard him,” the woman answered. “It’s the first time he’s made a sound—*since*, except a sort of groaning. I’m jolly glad. *We* don’t want him to drop off the hooks. Not *much!*”

“You are ver’ foolish, Madam. He can give your ’usband and ze ozzers away. It is only me who ’ave nozzing to fear. He do not see me zere. Yet I am witness agains’ any ones who treat me wrong.”

“Pooh!” said the woman. “You’re always harp-

ing on your power to hurt us. It's nil. The hunt's out for you, Mr. Markoff or Hablin, or whatever you like to be. If we're keeping you for our own sakes because you haven't paid up, anyhow it's your game to lie low. You daren't show your nose outside this door. But for heaven's sake, let's stop arguing. I'm for nothing in that part of the business."

"You 'ave all got some plan you try to work behin' my back," growled the man. "I tell you enough times, ze money will come!"

"*When* it comes, you'll get the pearls: *if* it comes in time. That's the rub!"

The word "pearls" was like a key. It unlocked the door of Pat's memory, and impressions flowed in. But they were confused, without beginning or end; and he lay motionless, hoping for more clues. He was conscious that the woman leaned over him. She brought with her a heavy oriental perfume, and he felt a waft of warm breath on his face.

"Are you awake?" she asked, speaking slowly. "Do you know what happened to hurt you—eh?"

Pat did not show by the quiver of an eyelid that he had heard.

"W'en 'e come back to himself, bineby, 'e will remember everything per'aps, an' zen w'ere will you all be?" the man wanted to know.

"He never will remember, unless there's someone to give him the tip. People *don't* remember with concussion," the woman said.

So that was what he had—concussion of the brain! Pat wondered how he had got it. One of the impressions filtering back was of hitting a man, and hearing him squeal. What had followed was a blank, like everything since. Maybe some other man had hit him—from behind.

The woman moved away, and cautiously Pat opened his eyes. The greyness was still there, but it was more definite, more commonplace, as if belonging to earth and things of everyday life. He thought that he must be lying on his back in a bed, looking straight up at a low grey ceiling. There were grey walls, too, but he could not turn his head to see more, as his neck was stiff and painful. The light was so dim that he imagined it must be drawing toward dusk in a room with small windows partly covered with curtains.

More talking went on at a distance, between the man and woman. Sometimes it sounded so far off that Pat wondered if there was an adjoining room with an open door. Presently, when all had been silent for so long that he had almost dozed off, there was a sudden explosion of voices. The listener fancied that there were two new ones, both voices of men, and one he recognized, though irritatingly he could not attach the right name label.

He kept his eyes closed, because he was sure that the latecomers would look at him, and his caution was rewarded. Someone turned on a light. The

two new voices mumbled in sick-bed whispers across his pillow. He caught a word here and there: again "the pearls," "Markoff," and "the Duchess." The last gave him an odd thrill. *Juliet!* She had been angry. How was she feeling now? Was she seeking for him? Or did she give him credit for running off with the pearls—or Lyda? or—both together?

The thought that this might be so—probably was so—made him long to spring up and fight his way to his wife, somehow. And perhaps he could not have resisted attempting to move had not a sudden noise snapped the thread of his thought.

A quarrel had broken out over something between the men. All three voices rose sharply. The woman intervened, and was rebuked. Then came a squall of rage, instantly stifled. The woman screamed, and drew in her breath with a gasp. All was still again.

"Hark!" whispered someone.

The light went out.

In place of the greyness, blackness fell.

Pat could hear the pounding of his own heart, and another sound almost hidden by the noise in his breast.

He thought that stairs were squeaking under a stealthy foot.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CRYSTAL

“HAVE you an appointment, Madam?” asked the elderly woman who opened the door of Madame Venno’s flat for Juliet.

She was a person of almost oppressively respectable appearance, with grey hair parted in the middle, gold-rimmed *pince nez* resting on a thin nose, and a neat body clad in black silk. If Madame Venno needed a chaperon, her door opener was ideal!

Juliet had run upstairs so fast that she was breathing hard. Passing the office of the *Inner Circle* had disgusted her. She felt contaminated, almost ill; but the sight of this woman was like a dash of cool water on a hot forehead.

“I have no appointment,” she answered. “But—I came because of a message. I’m the Duchess of Claremanagh.”

“Please to walk in, Madam,” said the woman, without any evidence of being impressed. “I will give you a private room to wait in.”

They stood in a hall, white-panelled, carpeted with red. The spruce black silk figure threw open a door, and Juliet entered a tiny room, hardly more than a

closet. The only furnishing consisted of a luxurious easy chair, a table on which were magazines and a box of cigarettes, and on the wall a mirror. This mirror was opposite the chair; and behind the chair was a second door. Any one opening that door would see a reflected image of the sitter in the chair.

As Juliet sank into chintz-covered depths the murmur of voices reached her. She thought, in fact, that she heard sounds from two rooms, one on each side of the tiny cubicle in which she had been put to wait.

"This little hole is for special visitors," she told herself. "Probably that woman was ordered to bring me here if I came. Madame Veno's room must be on the right of this, and it's her voice I hear on that side, talking to a client. On the left, I suppose, it's the ordinary waiting room, full of people—jabbering to each other about Madame Veno and the wonderful things they've heard about her from their friends! Or else it's a room where they keep up the practice by manicuring clients' nails. But I'm sure she means to sneak me in ahead of them."

Juliet was right. In less than ten minutes there was the click of a latch, and the door opposite the mirror opened. In the long glass her eyes met the smiling ones of a pale, dark woman with a clever, somewhat common face. There was nothing mystic about her appearance, but on the other hand there

was nothing meretricious, no attempt at Eastern allurements. Juliet had already guessed from the ordinary furnishing of the flat that Madame Veno's *metier* was clean, straightforward frankness, as opposed to the cult of dim rooms, purple curtains, and incense. Now this impression was confirmed. The one false note was a heavy perfume such as some women adore and are unable to resist.

"I'm glad to see you, Duchess," said the woman. "I hoped you would call, and I'm going to slip you in before the others who are waiting their turn. They won't know, so no harm's done! Will you come into my room?"

She spoke cheerfully, briskly, rather more like an Englishwoman than an American, and Juliet wondered if she were an English Jewess.

The door led into an alcove of a fair-sized room decorated in green. It was as little as possible like the mysterious sanctum of an ordinary "fortune teller" or crystal gazer. Juliet had seen two or three of these in several countries. They had always been Egyptian, or at least reminiscent of Leon Bakst. This might have been any woman's boudoir: but when Madame Veno had drawn the thin green curtains, the place seemed to fill with an emerald dusk, like the dusk of dreams, or the green dimness under sea.

"I suppose you think I'm not very 'psychic'," the mistress of the room remarked, placing a chair for

her visitor at a table covered with a square of green velvet. "People *do* think that! Then, when they've consulted me, they're surprised sometimes. They get better results than from those who go in for what I call 'scenery'. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Juliet, "I suppose I do know."

"All I want to put me in the right frame of mind is *green*," explained Madame Veno, "this kind of green twilight."

She switched away the velvet covering from the table. Underneath was a cushion, and a crystal which reflected the prevailing colour. Then she sat down opposite the Duchess.

"The Countess told you what happened when I was looking into the crystal for her?" she asked.

"Madame de Saintville said that you saw something which concerned me. But how did you *know* it concerned me?"

"Your face came into the crystal. I'd seen your photograph, and recognized you. Besides, I felt—I *felt* that you were in great trouble."

"What else did you see in the crystal?"

"Let me look again, now you are here, and see if the same thing comes." As she spoke, Madame Veno bent forward and gazed closely into the transparent ball on a black base.

Some moments passed in dead silence. Juliet watched the woman's features, which became fixed

and masklike. Suddenly Madame Veno started slightly and began to speak.

"I see—a handsome young man—very charming. It is your husband, Duchess. He is lying ill in a poor room. It seems to be a kind of cellar. He tosses about. He is delirious. He calls for you. I know that, because at the same time I see the picture I hear his voice. The name is 'Juliet!' I think he has had an accident. But I can't see what it was, I only know that he has hurt his head. I feel the pain myself. And I feel what he is thinking about: you—and something else. Ah, a rope of pearls! Now I get a whisper! It comes to me from his thoughts. He went in search of something that was lost—a thing of great value. Yes, the pearls!"

"Did he get them?" Juliet asked, mechanically. She had little if any faith in the woman, but a faint thrill ran through her. She could not help being slightly impressed by the seeress's change of manner, and the hypnotized look in her eyes.

"He got them—and then they were taken away. But they are in the house where he is. It is not a good house. It is a house of thieves. Ah, I *must* find out where it is, or I can do you no good. Or else—if I cannot find the house I must will the man who has got the pearls to communicate with me. I see him plainly."

"Why shouldn't he communicate with *me*?" asked Juliet.

“Will power doesn’t act like that,” exclaimed Madame Venó. “I could create a cord between another intelligence and my own, not between *two* outside intelligences. Ah, the picture has faded from the crystal! But it will come again. And for the moment we’ve seen enough. I have the man’s face clearly before my eyes. I will concentrate upon him as I have never concentrated before! I feel sure of the power to draw him to me.”

“How?” Juliet enquired.

“I can’t tell yet. He may be impelled to consult me about his future, to have his ‘luck’ foretold. That’s the line I will work on, in exerting influence. I shall remember his face from the crystal. I can’t make a mistake! Once I get him here I shan’t hesitate to use hypnotism. If that succeeds, I’ll ‘phone you to come round at once.”

“With a detective,” said Juliet.

Madame Venó’s face changed, flushing slightly over its sallowness. “Oh, no, Duchess!” she exclaimed, emphatically. “*That* wouldn’t do at all. Women in my profession can’t encourage detectives to come spying into their methods. So far I’ve never had any trouble. But I’ve had to be very careful. Detectives are the Enemy! I shall be very sorry indeed to be disobliging, but I’m afraid I must let this business drop unless you give me your word not to bring a detective into it. Indeed, I think I must ask you not to bring in any third party.

If you promise this, I don't think I'm conceited in saying I can positively make you an important promise in return. By my will power I will do for you what no detective on this earth could do. I'll draw into your circle the man who has got your husband lying helpless in his house—and who has got your pearls. Do you believe I am able to do this, or do you not?"

"I—can't say I quite believe," Juliet confessed. She might have been more definite, yet not have gone beyond the truth. She might have said, "What I think is, that you're a trickster. If there's anything in this at all beyond mere nonsense, you know where my husband is, and you're playing a deep game for money." But something warned the girl not to say this. She was *afraid* to say it—afraid to make the seeress afraid!

If Pat had been kidnapped, and this woman were a catspaw of those who wanted a ransom, Juliet was willing to pay. If only Pat were *true*—if only he hadn't left her of his own free will for love of Lyda, she would give every penny she had in the world to get him back, and not grudge it!

She reflected hastily that, if Madame Veno took her for a fool, it would be better to let it go at that rather than risk losing a chance—possibly the only chance—of saving Pat. As for telling Jack and Sanders secretly, this course must be decided later. There was surely no more harm in deceiving such

a woman than in tricking a dangerous animal, so far as moral principles were concerned. The one question was, could Madame Veno safely be deceived, or would she find a way of *forcing* a promise to be kept?

That question was answered at once.

"I don't blame you," said Madame, with a good-natured smile. "These great forces of Nature are beyond belief to those who haven't tested them. But I know by experience what I can do. I know also what I *can't* do. I can do nothing if the people whose interests I serve work against me consciously or unconsciously. Now, I read your mind as I read the crystal. I see you're thinking whether or not to make a mental reservation about that promise! Well, I don't want to control you, Duchess, though I *could* do so. But if you bring any one into this, the whole effort will be vain. I might get the man we want here. I might hypnotize him to the point of speaking out. I might 'phone you. And yet, if you weren't alone, or if someone were spying outside, my power over him would break like—that!" she snapped her fingers together, her black eyes holding Juliet's. "Now," she went on when she'd got her effect, "I'm going to give you a proof of good faith. My fee for a consultation—just an ordinary one, not a special like this—is twenty-five dollars. No, don't take out your purse, Duchess! I won't accept a cent unless I bring off the stunt. The rest—is up to you."

"Very well," said Juliet on a sudden resolution. "Let it be so. I'll promise what you ask, and—I'll keep my promise. If you send for me, I'll come alone. And I'll tell nobody. But—I'm not a child. I must protect myself in some way. When I start for your place next time, I shall leave a letter for my cousin, Captain Manners, to be delivered by hand if I'm not back in two hours after leaving home. In the letter I shall tell him everything. But it won't be sent if all goes right. So if you play fair you've nothing to dread."

"Unless the letter should be sent to your cousin by mistake."

"My maid is a very intelligent woman," said Juliet. "She doesn't make mistakes."

"Oh, you'll leave the letter with your maid!" echoed Madame Veno.

"Yes. Do you agree to the arrangement?"

"I do," returned Madame.

Juliet rose to go. She was feeling intensely excited, if not really hopeful. Even if there were a plot, it seemed as if this might be the best way of setting to work, and she saw herself beating Sanders as a detective. So far he had made only trifling discoveries: fingerprints on the safe which told nothing, since they were Pat's and Lyda Pavoya's; there were no clues which might solve the mystery of Pat's disappearance, or lead to finding the lost pearls.

As for Jack, he was *Lyda's* man now! He believed the story which explained the fingerprints. She, Juliet, might soon show these two men that alone she had accomplished more than either in solving the double mystery.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BARGAIN

Two days passed; and small as was Juliet's faith in Madame Veno, she did not stir from the house lest the woman should telephone in her absence.

The strain of constant suspense was like a screw tightening her nerves to breaking point. Her irritation grew against Jack, who persisted in warning her that she would repent her suspicions of Lyda Pavoya. To his mind apparently the dancer's story accounted for everything. Lyda had volunteered a statement that she had touched the safe after Claremanagh opened it, and she had offered to give Sanders her own fingerprints in order that they might be identified with those taken on the door of the safe, the only ones found there with the exception of the Duke's. Even this fact—that there should be no other marks visible—didn't prejudice Jack against the Siren. According to him—and (*he said*) to Sanders—the *real* thief or thieves had used rubber gloves.

As for Sanders, he tried to calm the Duchess's impatience by assuring her that everything possible was being done. He even had a theory. But, of

what comfort was that to her, as he refused to tell her what it was until—or if—he could obtain positive proof? It hardly interested Juliet that he should have cabled Monsieur Mayen and learned in reply that there was no scratch on the duplicate ring given Mayen by Pat. She hadn't for a moment supposed there would be! Of course it merely made matters worse that Mayen should be left-handed, and that a specimen seal he sent by cabled request should have an entirely different appearance from those on the covering of the packet. Also, it seemed stupid rather than intelligent that Defasquelle should be watched. The detective admitted that the Frenchman seemed above suspicion. He had begged the Duke to open the packet in his presence, which alone proved his innocence, as Sanders couldn't help seeing. Besides, the French police had replied to a wired demand for Defasquelle's *dossier*, by saying that he was a person of unblemished character. He appeared to deserve the trust reposed in him by Monsieur Mayen; had saved up a little money and was engaged to a pretty girl with a good *dot*, the daughter of a hotel keeper in Marseilles. Not only that, Defasquelle was remaining in New York for the purpose of giving what aid he could. Altogether, Juliet considered that Sanders' activities were disappointing, and Jack's no better.

She refused to meet Lyda and talk with her in person as Jack advised her to do, and between her

sense of being deserted and her desperate anxiety for the truth about Pat, she found more and more that her thoughts clung to the broken reed of hope held out by Madame Venó.

At last, when she was making up her mind to see the woman again without waiting longer, the message came.

Juliet was in the act of answering a letter from Nancy Van Esten, begging her to be at the dress rehearsal for the "great show" which was to benefit the Armenians. There was an undertone of friendly insistence which Juliet understood very well. Nancy knew what people were saying about Pat and Pavoya and the pearls. If she—Juliet—refused to attend this rehearsal to which all her most intimate "pals" were going, everyone would draw certain conclusions. She hated to go, but had written to say that she'd "drop in about five o'clock"—the rehearsal had to be in the afternoon, as the roof garden theatre was wanted in the evening for the last night of a revue—when the telephone bell rang almost in her ear. She picked up the receiver from the writing table, and her heart leaped at the sound of Madame Venó's voice.

"Is that you yourself, Duchess? Yes? Well, *he's here!* Can you come around at once?"

"Yes," said Juliet, and putting down the receiver had begun to get ready, when she remembered the letter which ought to be left for Jack. There was

no time, after all, to write details. She ought to have had the note ready for emergencies, but it hadn't occurred to her till now. Hurriedly she jotted down the address of Madame Veno and a request to Jack to send there. Then, when she had scrawled "Captain Manners, Tarascon Hotel," and sealed the envelope, the Duchess rang for her maid.

"I'm going out, Simone," she said. "It's now four-thirty. If I'm not back by six-thirty it will mean that—that I must miss an appointment with Captain Manners; so at that time take this to his hotel yourself. He tells me that he's always at home between six-thirty and seven-thirty, so he's sure to be there. But if not, you can ring up Mr. Sanders at his private address, which I'll jot down for you, and ask him to call for Captain Manners' letter which concerns his business as well. I *expect* to come in much sooner, however—in which case you will simply hand this envelope back to me. You quite understand?"

"I quite understand, *Madame la Duchesse*," echoed Simone, pinning on her mistress's hat, and handing her a pair of gloves.

So well did she understand that, the moment Juliet was out of the house (the car having been ordered), she examined the back of the said envelope. In her hurry Juliet had not sealed it firmly. The flap was still wet, and came loose with almost ridiculous ease.

Simone had been somewhat surprised by the Duchess's instructions (her reason for wishing to acquaint herself with the contents of the letter) but she was still more surprised by the letter itself.

The Duchess was going to Madame Veno's, evidently to keep an engagement already made, and it would seem that she considered herself in some danger. Could Madame Veno mean to give away Mademoiselle Amaranthe's connection with the *Inner Circle*?

Simone told herself that this was an absurd and far-fetched suspicion, because it was not probable that Madame Veno knew anything about her activities. Besides, why should the woman—even if she knew them—betray valuable secrets of the paper and its best correspondents? It was but an idea born of an uncomfortable conscience—another name for fear.

Juliet was admitted to Madame Veno's flat by the respectable creature in black silk who had impressed her so favourably two days before. Again she was taken into the cubicle of a private waiting-room, and there Madame came at once, from her own room.

"He's still here!" she announced, having closed the door. "Everything is wonderful—but different from what I expected."

"Who is the man?" Juliet abruptly asked.

"I don't know. I haven't been able yet to make

him tell me that. He seemed so obstinate that I thought I'd better extract more important details first, in case in his struggles not to obey I should lose mind-control of him—which does happen now and then in such experiments."

"You mean to tell me that this man—whoever he is—actually came to you from heaven knows where because you willed him to come, and that you hypnotized him to find out about my husband?"

"I mean just that," answered Madame Veno, triumphantly. "I've done this sort of thing before. It's the secret of my success over other psychics. I've found out that your husband was kidnapped, just as I thought. As for the pearls, so far as I can understand, he had them on him. Anyhow, they're in these people's possession. But you'd better come into my room and talk to the man."

"Is he still hypnotized?" Juliet wanted to know, irritated by her feeling that she was being deceived, yet eager and curious.

"No, not now. I've released him from the influence. He was going pale about the lips, which shows a weak heart, and I was scared. I can't take big risks of that sort! But when I explained what I'd got out of him, and when I'd even made him put on paper a short statement of his own handwriting, he saw that he might as well be frank——"

"If the statement was signed, you must have got his name. And if not, what use is it?"

"He *thinks* he's signed it, for I covered up the place where the name should be as if accidentally, and snatched the paper away as though I was afraid he'd grab it from me. It was when I was willing him so hard to sign that he began to look queer. So I had to give it up."

"I see," said Juliet. "Well, take me into the next room, and let me try what *I* can get out of him!"

"You can get everything out of him, Duchess, and you can get back your husband and your pearls. That is, if you're willing to pay the price this man asks. Even in his sleep he was firm about that, and he hasn't told where the Duke is."

Juliet did not believe that the man knew where the Duke was. It was so much more likely that the whole business was a trick to extract money and—give nothing of value in return! Still, she was more eager to see the occupant of Madame Venó's room than she had ever been to see any one—except Pat, in the blessed old days.

The green curtains were drawn, and though twilight was falling out of doors the only lamp was a small green-shaded one on the table of the crystal. The man who stood facing the two women as they entered was in shadow, all except his hands, which showed white and large, crossed on folded arms.

It was an instant before Juliet realized that something more than shadow obscured the features. Then her piercing eyes made out that a layer of black

crape was drawn across them as far up as the forehead, as far down as the mouth. Beneath this mask a beard protruded like a fringe, but Juliet told herself it might be false.

"Oh, you have masked yourself!" exclaimed Madame Venno. "He wasn't masked when I left him, Duchess!"

Juliet made no comment, though if the man and woman were in collusion it was probable that Madame lied.

"There's no objection to my being masked, I suppose?" said the man. "I have a right to protect myself."

"Does he speak rather like an Englishman, or do I imagine it?" Juliet wondered.

"I don't object," she said aloud. "I don't care who you are if you can give me news of my husband, and if—if you can bring him back to me."

"I can give you news now," the man replied. "And you can have him back to-morrow night if you choose."

"What are your conditions?" Juliet asked.

"One million dollars for the Duke *and* the pearls."

"Oh!" said the Duchess. "And what for the Duke without the pearls?"

"We don't treat separately."

"Indeed! And what if I refuse to treat at all?"

"In that case, you'll never see your husband again on this side the grave."

“You mean you’ll *murder* him if I don’t pay ransom!”

“Not at all. This is the Duke’s own affair. He’s in it with us. That is”—the man spoke quickly, when anger flamed on Juliet’s face and he must have feared that she would cease bargaining for a man capable of “holding up” his wife—“that is, he’s in it to this extent: he’s taken an oath not to give us away. He was hurt in an accident—an affair neither he nor you would like to have come out—and I and a friend of mine saved his life. When we’d done that, as we’re poor men we didn’t see why we shouldn’t get something for ourselves. We’re amateurs at these things, my mate and I, and we were at odds how to approach you, Madam, without risking trouble. Then I had a ‘hunch’ to consult this lady. Dreamed about her, felt I *must* come!” Madame Veno gave Juliet a look. “Now I find she was mesmerizing me or something of the sort. But she’s given me good advice, and she’s brought you and me together, so maybe all’s well that ends well.”

“Where’s my husband?” asked Juliet.

“Where I live. And you could have me followed all around New York without finding out where that is. I’m up to every dodge of that kind, I can tell you! But what my friend and I—the Duke standing by us because of what we’ve done for him—what we propose, is this: you get hold of a million dollars without telling any one what the money’s for. We’ll

know if you play us false. We have our spies. It *must* be all in notes. Then, if this lady—Madame Veno—is willing to see the thing through, you'll bring to her flat the whole sum, only with the *notes cut in two*. That plan is to prove my good faith. An hour after the Duke shall arrive—with the pearls, in an auto—at your own house. And the remaining halves of the notes shall be handed to the chauffeur by you in person before your husband leaves the car. Does that scheme look good to you?"

Juliet paused for an instant, but not to consider the money question, for she would have given not one million but all the millions she possessed to have Pat with her, alive and safe. Nor did she now care a straw whether or not these two creatures were in a plot together. She hesitated only because it seemed too good to be true that Pat should be given back to her so easily. She had suffered so much, had realized so bitterly her need of him—guilty or innocent—that she was actually dazzled by the man's offer. And when she had calmed herself by drawing a deep breath or two, she answered:

"Yes, it *seems* good to me!"

"Then it *is* good, all right!"

"How soon—can you do this?"

"How soon can you get hold of the money?"

"To-morrow. Of course it's too late to-day."

"To-morrow then. Come here at this same time. Can you manage that?"

"I will manage it," Juliet said. She remembered that she had written to Nancy van Esten, meaning to attend the rehearsal. The letter wasn't posted yet, but she would send it, and go to the theatre for a few minutes. From there, she would come here to Madame Veno's. No one could think then that she had avoided meeting Lyda Pavoya, but if she had a pressing engagement to keep, it wouldn't be *her* fault if there were no time for introductions!

Besides, Jack Manners and Sanders were supposed to be coming to-morrow afternoon, to discuss some new detail in the Duke's study—what, Juliet didn't know. The rehearsal would give her an excuse for absence while they were there, and as it was to meet Lyda, Jack would be pleased to have her go.

"Remember, Madam, if you don't keep this business strictly to yourself, the Duke won't materialize," the man in the mask went on. "I assure you—not on my honour, because that's a minus quantity to you, but on your husband's—you can take my word for this. And furthermore, if you attempt to trick us you'll never have a chance again."

"If there were as little chance of your tricking me, as of my tricking you," Juliet exclaimed, "I should be happy."

"*Be* happy then!" retorted the man. "The thing's settled. I'm off. And I'll tell the Duke that you send him a good message."

He was out of the room before Juliet had realized

that he meant to suit his action to his word! With a wild impulse she would have sprung after him to ask other questions, but the door slammed in her face. She was too late. And besides, what would have been gained by keeping the man a moment more?

"I don't think there's anything further to do or say. But let him go quietly," Madame Veno advised.

Juliet turned upon her. "I believe you're *in this!*" she cried.

The elder woman smiled indulgently, as at a petulant child. "My dear, I'm *not!*" she said. "But I can't prove that, if you don't want to take my word."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter!" Juliet sighed. "What do I owe you for—your services?"

"What you think they're worth. Pay me to-morrow," Madame replied.

To-morrow! It seemed that Juliet could not live till then!

CHAPTER XIX

OLD NICK

"I WISH to heaven the scent of Pat's tobacco weren't so d—d strong on that handkerchief in the packet. It's the blackest bit of evidence against him!" Manners was saying to the detective, in Claremanagh's study, when a tap came at the door.

The two locked themselves in for their occasional seances in this room, and Jack himself answered the knock. He was about to scold Togo for disturbing him (a thing strictly forbidden to all except the Duchess) when the sight of Lyda's handwriting pencilled on an envelope caused him to bite back the words.

"Who brought this?" he asked.

"A boy, sir," replied the Japanese. "He is from some theatre. He said he went first to the Tarascon Hotel, but they told him you'd left word to have you called up here for anything important, so he came round."

"Is he waiting for an answer?"

"No, sir. He was in a hurry to get back. He said there was no answer."

Jack retired into the study with the letter and care-

fully, gently opened the envelope. Even though he was eager to know what Lyda had to say, he couldn't deal roughly with anything she had touched. This was not the only letter he had had from her, but it made his heart beat as if it were the first.

"My dear friend," she wrote with pencil, evidently in haste, "I have something very important to tell you. I cannot put it well in a letter. But it has to do with the Duchess, your cousin. She may be running into some danger. I should like to save her from that if I could! Come to the theatre and see me for a few minutes. I shall be free at six precisely, after rehearsing my new dance of the 'Swan and the Cygnet' with Mrs. Van Esten's little girl. Then I shall have a few minutes for you. Meanwhile, however, if you have time after getting this, try to make your cousin's maid tell if she knows where her mistress has gone. Yours ever—Lyda P."

This was all. But to Jack Manners it was sweet as the perfume of an Eastern garden by moonlight—*her* perfume! It was all he could do to wrench his mind from entranced thoughts of Lyda, to concentrate them upon Juliet. Poor Juliet! He understood now why he hadn't suffered at seeing her after her marriage, or cared a single rap! It was because he'd never been in love with her really, except as a dear, rather trying cousin, and because what he'd called "love" had worn off even before that, like thinly spread gilt on gingerbread! He had not known

what love was till the night when Lyda Pavoya's eyes said to him with their first blinding look, "You are *the* man; I am *the* woman."

He believed in her utterly now, and if he had not, he would have wished to kill himself. To know her, a good and glorious woman, made the splendour of life.

"Why, Juliet has gone to the dress rehearsal of the roof-garden show," he remembered. That was the word she had left with Togo to give him and Sanders on opening the door for them. But—Lyda was at the rehearsal! And she hadn't seen Juliet. Before sending such a message to him she would have made certain that the Duchess hadn't arrived! He would have Simone down at once!

But Simone—the report came—was not in the house. She had gone out with Admiral Beatty, the Duchess's bull-dog. Neither Togo nor Huji could say when she was likely to return. But Togo made a suggestion. Nickson, the Duke's English valet, might know something of her movements.

"Nickson!" echoed Jack, surprised. "This is a new development, isn't it, Nick knowing anything about Simone? I had an idea there was no love lost there."

Togo ventured, on this encouragement, to smile dryly. At heart he had as little affection for Mademoiselle as Old Nick had. He would have liked to do her an ill turn in payment of many snubs, if it could

be managed safely. "There is not much love, Captain," he said. "Perhaps that is why Mr. Nickson watches Mademoiselle when she takes the dog for a walk."

"Is he afraid she'll do Beatty harm?" asked Jack.

"I do not know, Captain. Mr. Nickson has not much talk. But perhaps he would answer some questions."

"Is he in the house?"

"Yes, Captain. I noticed he left soon after Mademoiselle, soon enough to see where she went—as he often does these days now His Grace is gone, and Mr. Nickson has not so much to keep him busy. But he is back."

"Ask him to come here," said Manners. He spoke gravely, and as the respectful Togo retired, threw Sanders a puzzled look. "Is there anything in this?" he asked.

"That's what I've been wondering myself," vouchsafed the detective.

"You knew Old Nick was dogging Simone's footsteps?"

"Yes, but I didn't know why. I've been trying to find out."

"How?"

"By having the said footsteps dogged on my own account."

"You've had Simone shadowed?"

"Certainly. But that doesn't necessarily imply

suspicion. I'd be a poor sort of chap at my job if I didn't have every servant in the house shadowed."

"Great Scott! And without a word to me or my cousin!"

"I can't bother you two with every detail. Besides, she or you might have objected, and that would have made things awkward all around."

"H'm! I see. Well, where does Simone go?"

"She goes, quite naturally, to a French café where she can drink her native coffee and chat with compatriots in her native tongue."

"Nothing much in that, then, it would seem."

"No. Nothing much. Or—so it 'would seem', as you say."

"All the same you're putting two and two together?"

"That would be a mistake, from my point of view. The great thing is, to see whether two and two put themselves together."

"Shall I come in, sir?" asked the man known to the household as "Old Nick," when his tap on the door left ajar for him had not been answered.

"Yes, come in," said Jack.

"Old Nick" was in reality not old. He might have been anywhere between thirty and forty, and was the typical British soldier turned valet. There was, however, a glint in his eye at times when fixed on a person detested, which made his nickname not inappropriate.

"Togo thinks you may know when Simone is likely to return," Manners explained.

"She generally does about this time, sir. I'm expecting her any minute."

"Is it her movements or Beatty's that interest you?"

Nickson swallowed discreetly. "May I speak out, sir?"

"That's what we want you to do."

"Well, sir, I was with 'is Grice one wye or another all through the war, and there's nobody to me like 'im—never was nor never will be. So there it *is!* And when 'e just vanished as you might say without so much as tippin' the wink to me, I was dead sure 'e 'adn't gone of 'is own accord. So I sets my wits to work the best I could, and I listens to talk and I reads all that blinkin' newspaper rot. Thinks I, looks as if them beastly pearls has somethin' to say in the business. So I asks meself: '*Oo's* walked off with 'em, if any one, and is 'is Grice doin' a flit in the 'ope of trackin' the bloke down? If them pearls was ever *in* this 'ouse, they must 'ave gone out again. '*Oo* could' a' done the trick?' Well, I never trusted Mam'selle the wye 'er Grice did. She 'ad the run o' the plice. It was just on the cards she might o' laid 'er 'ands on the combination for openin' the safe. 'Well, I puts *that* in my pipe an' smokes it. Strikes me she goes out a bit more reg'lar for 'er prominides with Beatty since that French Mounseer brought

'is packet o' pearls, than she used to do. So I 'as the curiosity to foller at a respectful distance one dye, an' sees m' lidy step into a French restorong. Not long after, comes along Mounseer of the pearls. I was sent to meet 'im at the dock, but missed 'im there, 'cause o' some mistike about 'is initials w'ere you wites for the Customs men. But I seed 'im 'ere at th' 'ouse later when I comes 'ome to report to 'is Grice. I recognized 'im alright. The question to my mind was w'ether 'e'd chose that restorong 'cause 'twas French or cause o' Mam'selle."

Jack's eyes flashed to Sanders, who smiled.

"You and I have been rivals in this game, Nickson," he remarked. "What conclusion did you come to about Mademoiselle?"

Nickson flushed. "Didn't know I was on your pitch, sir. But if yer asks me, in my opinion 'e comes for 'er. Or else she comes for 'im."

"A cat may look at a king!" said Sanders. "They're compatriots. Why shouldn't they meet?"

"On the other 'and, w'y *should* they?" ventured Nickson. "I wouldn't if I was 'im. And see 'ere, sir, beggin' your pardon, I know you're a detective, in a privit wye. I've told you all I done. But t'ain't all I *want* to do. I want to find 'is Grice. If you and the Captain make any frontal attack, so to speak, will you tike me along? I'd give my life for th' Dook. And I might come in 'andy, 'oo knows?"

"Who knows, indeed?" echoed Sanders. "But

you shall have the chance of finding out when the time comes. And it may come soon—any day, any hour, even any minute. Now, if you think *Made-moiselle's* due back, I suggest that you leave us, as we've sent for her here. If there's anything in your suspicions, we don't want her to smell a rat."

"Right you are, sir, and thank you, sir!" said Nickson. "I'll be off and leave all clear."

"So, you actually suspect Simone? *And Defasquelle!*" Jack turned on Sanders when they were alone.

"I can't go as far as that—yet. There's no evidence against them—not even circumstantial. There's no crime in a flirtation between a man and woman, both of the *Midi*, thrown together in a foreign land. I meant to spring this on you only when or if I had cause to be sure. Up to date, my indoors man at Rüdin's—that's the French place in Twelfth Street where they meet—hasn't been able to overhear a word between the two, though he speaks French. He's acting as a waiter there now. He has instructions to ring me up if he gets onto anything queer. And I always leave word at home and the office where I'm going to be."

This conversation, following Lyda's letter, had keyed up Manners' nerves. He started as rather a sharp knock sounded on the door.

It was Simone. She was very neat and *chic*, and

led Beatty, whose bored look suggested that he had been denied his proper share of exercise.

"*Monsieur le Capitaine!*" she purred; and bowed discreetly to the detective. "Togo says Monsieur has asked for me the moment I am home. I come. But the dog——"

"Never mind the dog!" Sanders caught the word from Jack. "We've some questions to ask you, Mademoiselle. Please stay where you are."

His tone was rough, and he had put on a professional, hectoring air. There had been no time to arrange a plan of action, but Manners guessed what was in Sanders' mind. He meant to try scaring Simone; and he wanted to do it off his own bat. Jack trusted him, and was willing to keep out of the business. Though the Frenchwoman's black eyes appealed to him—as her mistress's relative—against the rude stranger, he sat still and lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER XX

THE THIRD DEGREE

"To BEGIN with, where's the Duchess?"

"At a rehearsal, Monsieur, of an entertainment Madame van Esten has got up. Mademoiselle Pavoya will——"

"We don't want to hear about her. The Duchess *isn't* at the rehearsal."

"Then I do not know where she is. It is her affair, not mine." Simone looked the picture of injured innocence.

"Perhaps you *don't* know," agreed Sanders. "But you see, you've made so many of her affairs *your* affairs, it's hard to tell where you draw the line."

The French maid turned pale in rather a repulsive way she had, beginning at the lips, which she bit to keep their colour. From her looks she might have been furious—or frightened.

"I do not understand you, Monsieur," she almost spat.

"That doesn't matter much. What does matter is, we understand *you*."

Under her black-dotted veil Simone's olive sallowness greened. "Monsieur accuses me of—something?"

Sanders grinned with the utmost cruelty. "Well, what do you think?"

"I think a person has perhaps told lies about me, Monsieur!"

"Ah!" the detective leapt in his chair as if he had caught her—as if she had given him a chance for which he'd waited. "Ah! What's the name of that person?"

The Frenchwoman began to feel sick. Her fears, though acute, had been vague. Suddenly they became definite. She floundered. So much depended on saying the right thing that she was terribly afraid of saying the wrong one. She glanced at Captain Manners again, but he had taken up a paper. To her horror it was the *Inner Circle*, which Sanders had bought and brought in to discuss. Her knees turned to water. She could not help giving a faint gasp. Her eyes were fixed on the "Whisperer's" page, which was held up—as if purposely. Both men saw the stare: and into the minds of both sprang the same thought

Jack had had it before. He had even hinted it to Juliet, who laughed it to scorn, and remarked that she knew Simone better than he could possibly know her. Sanders had had the thought, and mentioned it to Manners. But there was no proof; and the Frenchwoman's "shadower" had never seen her go to the office of the *Inner Circle*. As for letters—Sanders had put Togo onto watching for them.

Simone had sent out none at all from the house. Yet now that one bleak glare at the open paper, and both men were as sure as if the woman had confessed.

"You think your editor has been talking, eh?" the detective said. "That's as may be. Anyhow, we *know*."

The telephone bell rang. Jack took up the receiver. "Yes, Mr. Sanders is here," he replied to some question. "He'll speak with you in a second. Hold the line."

Sanders bounded to the 'phone. "Yes—yes—good!" were the only words he said. But Jack knew he was speaking to his man at the café. Then he turned again to Simone. "Come here and call your friend Defasquelle," he sharply ordered. "Tell him he must turn up at his house at once or there'll be a disaster for you both.

Simone grasped the back of a chair, and clung to it. "I cannot, Monsieur," she gulped. "I know Monsieur Defasquelle only by seeing him here. I——"

"Don't waste words," Sanders cut her short. "It'll be the worse for you if you do. You've just been with him now, at Rudin's. Call him up at his hotel."

"If—if I will not?" she stammered.

"Do you want to go to prison while he's left free—to *marry his girl in Marseilles?*"

That was a chance shot, but it found its billet.

"He *has* no girl in Marseilles!" Simone shrilled.

"Oh, yes, he has. I have his *dossier* from the Paris police. If you get him here and make him tell the truth, I promise you that marriage won't take place."

"I will call him," said Simone, sickly pale. She flitted across the room to the telephone.

Sanders rubbed his hands, and nodded to Jack. But Jack was glancing at his wrist-watch.

"What am I to do?" he asked the detective in a low voice. "The time's almost here for me to keep my appointment with Mademoiselle Pavoya."

"Go to it!" said Sanders. "I'm equal to Simone and Defasquelle. Now I've got proof enough to bluff on—my waiter man 'phoned that the pair were talking about the pearls and apparently blackguarding each other! I'll strip them of their secrets like a tree of ripe fruit. But look here, I have a 'hunch' that there's more in this *Inner Circle* business than meets the eye. Simone's been a catspaw. There may be wheels within wheels. When you go to meet Mademoiselle Pavoya take my tip and accept Old Nick's offer."

"What, have him with me?"

"Yes, wherever Pavoya sends you."

"She may not send me anywhere."

"I think she will send you somewhere. Meanwhile, I'll pump Simone and Defasquelle dry. When you get back I may have the pearls in pink cotton!"

Manners was torn. He wished to hear what Si-

mone said over the telephone. He wished to stay and witness the scene through between her, Defasquelle, and Sanders. But most of all he wished not to be late for Lyda. *Nothing* was worth that!

Jack arrived at the theatre just after Lyda had finished rehearsing a dance which she herself had arranged for the charity fête with Mrs. Van Esten's spoiled little girl.

Mademoiselle Pavoya was in her dressing room, he was told, and was expecting him. He went there quickly, afraid of being caught by someone he knew on the way, and forced to stop and talk nonsense, for the place was like a rabbit-warren—alive with pretty women and men who thought they were Society incarnate.

Lyda wore the swan costume she had worn the first night of their meeting—or one much like it; and the thought of that wonderful night thrilled him. How had he lived before that time? Yet he had gone out of her presence to doubt her truth, her honour! Never could he forgive himself for that, never could he worship her quite enough to make up for those hours of disloyalty.

She held out her hands to him, and he crushed first one then the other against his lips. "My Swan Goddess!" he exclaimed. "You're too marvellous like this. I can hardly believe you're flesh and blood—that I'm not dreaming you. I love you so much!"

She drew her hands away, and pushed him back when he would have taken her in his arms, wings and all.

"Perhaps you *are* dreaming me!" she smiled. "Dreaming the woman you think I am. And—you're not to do *that!* My hands only!"

"Yet you said you cared! You said you'd never felt for any man as you felt when our eyes first met."

"Ah, I said that when you'd confessed doubting me, and begged forgiveness, and vowed that nothing on earth or in heaven—or the other place—could ever make you doubt again. I owed you some confession in return."

"Then it *was* true?"

"Yes, it was true——"

"And is still?"

"But—of course! I do not change. Yet we are to be friends and nothing more until all is made clear—until even your cousin believes in me and doesn't think you'd be better dead than loving Lyda Pavoya. If that day could ever come!"

"It will come—soon. Oh, Lyda, remember that first night—at your house. You let me hold you in my arms then."

"But that was as a *friend*. You understood, I know! I was so stirred, so hard pressed, I wanted protection from someone sincere. And you were the sincerest man I ever saw."

"Yes, I did understand. I do now. And—I

won't bother you, Lyda—though it's hard work, this friendship business to a man who worships a beautiful woman as I worship you. But it's a bargain: friendship till—the day. May it be tomorrow!”

“Amen!” she echoed, with one of her fleeting smiles that came so seldom. “Now let us talk not of ourselves but of your cousin. We ought to have begun with her!”

“No!”

“Yes. Because there may be danger. I'll tell you quickly all I know. You have met a friend—an acquaintance—of mine, the Comtesse de Saintville?”

“Oh, yes—wife of a diplomat of sorts, isn't she? I've heard you were intimate.”

“That isn't true; but she has Polish blood, and for that or some other reason she likes to come to my house. I have been able to do her a good turn now and then. I wouldn't tell this to any one except you, *mon ami*, but she's a great bridge player, and loses more money than she ought. Lately she got into a bad—what you call *scrape*. She asked me to lend her a thousand dollars (you see, she dared not let her husband know!) but I couldn't. It was when I was putting aside every *sou* for Markoff. I could do nothing except promise to help later. I do not love Sonia de Saintville, yet I am sorry for her. I was afraid that in desperation she would do some stupid thing! The other day I had a windfall. A

friend in Paris who'd borrowed fifty thousand francs sent it back to me. I'd never expected to see the money again! So I 'phoned Sonia that now I could let her have the thousand dollars. She answered that a thousand would no longer be of use. But two thousand would save her. From the way she spoke, I understood that things were very grave. I said she should have the two thousand. She came to my house and I gave it to her in notes. I hadn't seen her for days, and she was looking ill—changed. I spoke kindly to the poor thing, and she broke down. It is the confession she made which will interest you, my friend. You would never guess! She had got into the power of that *Inner Circle* band."

"They were blackmailing her?"

"Yes, in a queer way. Did you ever suspect that Mr. Lowndes—'Billy Lowndes' I hear him called—was for something in that paper?"

"Good lord, no! *Billy Lowndes!*—Not that I ever liked him. But I didn't think he was as big a rotter as that! He was in love with my cousin Juliet, hard hit, before she married. And by a sort of coincidence Lowndes' sister Emmy—Lady West (you may have met her war-working in Paris or London)—made rather an ass of herself over Claremanagh."

"Perhaps that partly explains—some things, if we can patch them together. Listen! It was at Mrs. Billy Lowndes', Sonia said, that she lost most of her money. There's a set there that plays very

high. They make the Lowndes' flat a sort of private club. Sonia was dunned—and frightened of her husband. Billy Lowndes offered to lend her the whole lot. She thought, how good-natured! But soon she learned it was not goodness. He wanted something. The condition was that she should get the Duchess of Claremanagh to go and consult a palmist, crystal-gazer person, a Madame Veno. Did you ever hear of her?"

"No. Yes! By Jove, her name's on the building of the *Inner Circle*! The plot thickens."

"But how?"

"Oh, Sanders and I have caught my cousin Juliet's maid. We're sure it's she who gave away things to the 'Whisperer.' Sanders is putting her through the 'third degree' now. I couldn't stop to hear it out. I was due here. Besides, it looks as if the woman—Simone—was mixed up in the disappearance of the pearls, with the chap who brought them from France—Defasquelle. Perhaps this Veno person is in the affair, too. And the whole business may be one—with ramifications."

"That is what I've wondered—since Sonia confessed to-day what they made her do. She was to go to the Duchess, and tell her that Madame Veno had seen Claremanagh in the crystal—that she could help her find him. Sonia suspected something queer. She was sure at once that Lowndes was on that horrid paper—perhaps editor—of that vile 'Whisperer'.

And she'd heard the story about his being in love with your cousin when she was Miss Phayre. So she told him she couldn't do this commission. Then Lowndes lost all his good nature. He threatened that the 'Whisperer' of the *Inner Circle* might get some new material from him to whisper about: that there'd be paragraphs hinting of her debts and the ruin of her husband's career. That would have been the end of all things for Sonia! So she consented, after all. She called on the Duchess and told her that Madame Venó wanted to see her."

"When was that?"

"Three days ago."

"Juliet never breathed a word to Sanders or me. She left us in the dark."

"She would! Most women would. I should have let you know before, but Sonia told me only to-day. I wrote at once and asked you to come."

"Thank you, my White Swan. Many women in your place would have sat still and let poor Juliet go to the devil for treating you in the cattish way she has."

"I've no grudge against her! I should have done so in her place, if—if the man had been *you*, instead of Claremanagh."

"Darling! You expect to keep me at arms' length after that?"

"Yes—yes! Listen. The Duchess went to Madame Venó."

“How do you know?”

“The Veno woman herself was to inform Sonia if she didn’t turn up. In that case Sonia was to urge the Duchess. She—Sonia, I mean—was forced to go to Veno’s place as if to have her hand read, because *they* wouldn’t risk anything in writing. Luckily she had to make only one visit, because the very first time she was told the Duchess had been there. She was to come again on the third day. That was all arranged, though Sonia imagined that the Duchess didn’t *know* this. She was to think the arrangement was made later. But the third day is to-day. Sonia thought the first call the Duchess made was late in the afternoon, and something was dropped about the ‘same hour next time’. I believe she must be at Veno’s at this moment. And if those *Inner Circle* people are in the thing, and it’s a plot of some sort——”

“I’ll go there now!”

“What, to the *Inner Circle* office?”

“Not first, anyhow. Maybe later. That depends! But now, to Madame Veno’s.”

“Oh, I’m worried!” Lyda put out her hands, and laid them on his khaki-clad arms. “They say these *Inner Circle* people may be a nest of crooks!”

“I don’t doubt ‘they’ are right for once! But I’m not going alone.”

“I thought your detective was busy with the maid and the pearl carrier.”

"He is. But you know Old Nick? You must! You couldn't have known Pat without Old Nick."

"Good Old Nick! Of course I know him—since Paris, when Claremanagh was ill at my house."

"Well, Nick's going 'over the top' with me, as a volunteer. I don't know whether I shall find anything for him to do, but if so, he'll be ready!"

"Yes—yes! He'd do anything for Claremanagh."

"And even for Claremanagh's wife. Good-bye, my darling. Wish me luck."

"I do—I do."

"A kiss to speed the wish?"

"No. Only my hand. Wait!"

"How long—in God's name?"

"Till—the Duke's found—and the pearls."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MIDDLE DOOR

"TELL her two gentlemen for a consultation," Jack Manners announced at Madame Venó's door, Nickson at his heels.

"Madame can see no more clients this afternoon, sir," replied the neat woman in black silk. "She closes for business at six, and——"

"It's not six yet," cut in Jack.

"No, sir, but she has a lady with her now. I have orders to receive no one else."

"Can't you forget those orders, and persuade her to make an exception for us?" As he spoke, Manners took from his pocket a cigarette-case and extracted from it a twenty-dollar bill.

It would have been simple—physically—to push past the spinster-like person in black, but Jack could more easily have got over a high stone wall. Luckily she liked the look of the bank-note.

"I might try, sir," she hesitated. "If trying's worth twenty dollars to you."

"It is," he replied, promptly.

The money changed hands.

The woman in black silk ceased to bar the entrance with her neat person.

Jack walked into the flat, Nickson after him.

Again there was hesitation. Evidently their guide was not sure where she ought to put them. Jack imagined that he could read her thoughts. She feared to lead the forbidden visitors into the ordinary waiting-room. Either there was someone there, or something that ought not to be seen; or the room was next the one where Madame Veno was with her "last client"—Juliet! In that case, words might be overheard through a wall or door.

As he and Nick were invited into a dining room, Manners counted three doors on the opposite side of the hall, all closed. Behind one of those he believed Juliet to be hidden at that moment, probably in process of being blackmailed. He made up his mind quickly as to a plan of action, already half-decided on between Nickson and himself.

"We're in no great hurry, so long as we see Madame sooner or later," he told the woman who had let them in. "We wouldn't think of having you interrupt her."

"Oh! I shouldn't dare do *that*, sir!" she broke in, pocketing the twenty dollars. As she spoke, Jack caught a glance of awed respect which she cast across the corridor. •

"*The middle door*," he said to himself.

"Of course not," he said, aloud. "We'll wait. How'll you know when the client goes?"

"I expect Madame will ring for me to open the front door, and let the lady out. That's what she usually does."

"Very well, when the lady's gone speak for us."

Perhaps the black-silk woman wondered why the nice young gentleman hadn't given her ten dollars to try, and a promise of ten more if she succeeded. But that was his affair. Personally, she didn't expect to succeed. She was not acquainted with Madame's private business, but there was certainly something of the first importance "on" this afternoon. No clients had been admitted since four o'clock except the beautiful blonde young lady who had announced herself the other day as the Duchess of Claremanagh or some name like that. Before she was due two gentlemen had come up and hadn't given their names. But Madame had expected them, and they were still with her when the Duchess arrived. The black-silk woman had seen those gentlemen before, though never together. She had not much curiosity about them, for she was not of a curious disposition. That, Madame said, was one reason why she had engaged her. She had been a stewardess on board ship, but had disliked the sea, especially during the war, when she had been torpedoed once. Madame had crossed with her on three occasions, and the last time had offered her

this place. Some things she had seen had surprised and even shocked her a little, but she was well paid, and dry land was a good deal better than that nasty grey wet thing, the sea!

She felt that she had done right in putting these two new gentlemen into the dining room. If Madame firmly refused to see them, they might possibly be smuggled away without her knowing they had actually been let into the flat.

"That elderly party isn't going to stay on watch," Jack said to Nickson, when they had been shut into the commonplace little room where Madame Veno ate her meals. "There's no uneasy curiosity in that meek make-up."

"That's wot I was thinkin' myself, sir," agreed Old Nick.

"We're in luck so far," Jack went on. "It's time to begin reconnoitring" He went to the door. "If that decent body is in the hall, I shall ask her what time it is, and say my watch has gone slow—which is more than my heart has!"

Nickson grinned.

Jack peered out into the white-and-red corridor. Nobody was there. The red glass lamp suspended from the ceiling looked to him like a mass of clotted blood.

He took two steps across to the middle door, and listened. Then he returned hastily to Nick. "They're in there! I heard the Duchess's voice. Sounds as

if she were angry or frightened, or both. And there are two or more men. You and I have got to open the door, locked or unlocked."

"That's it, sir!" said Nickson. "But it won't be locked. Why should it? They don't suspect nothin', and if there's two men, 'er Grice couldn't get past 'em. You let me make a dash and see wot 'appens, sir!"

"No," Jack decided, "the dash is my job. You stand by, and if there's any dashing from the wrong side of the door, you'll know how to stop it, male or female."

"Yes, sir!"

Manners went again to the middle door. As he moved, Nickson closed in behind him, a substantial bulk, and in his eyes the light which made "Old Nick" his right name. He stood in such a position that if any one rushed for the front door or even some back exit, escape could be made only over his body. He saw that Captain Manners took hold of the door-knob with his left hand. The right hand was in the outer pocket of his coat, and Nickson knew what else was there. A similar thing was in a similar pocket of his own coat. It had been given to him by the Captain, whom he now liked and respected next to the Duke.

Suddenly Manners turned the handle and flung the door wide open with such violence that it struck the wall. He strode into the room. Nickson

blocked the doorway, but seeing with one glance that there was a door leading to another room, he took a step back to guard both.

It was a very green room—green as arsenic, he thought—lighted by one lamp, like a big emerald, on a centre table. Looking in from across the threshold, however, Nick could see four figures besides Manners'. There was the Duchess, tall and strangely white in a black dress and wide hat. There was another woman without a hat, also in black; a big, common hussy she looked to Nickson, with an eye like a fierce snake's. And there were two men.

About the pair an odd thing was that they had some thin black stuff tied over their faces. Captain Manners went for one man—the one who seemed to show fight, and when the other (who hadn't spied Nick yet) made for the door, Nick received him in open arms.

The big woman squealed, and the Duchess shrank back against the wall, then started forward again.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried, "they mustn't be killed! They know where Pat is. They say if they aren't back there soon, someone will put an end to him!"

Nick saw the woman, Madame Veno, he didn't doubt, spring for the electric-light button, but dragging his man with him, he was upon her like a tiger. One hand was enough for the man, who must have been a coward for he splashed about like a jelly with Nick's fist in his collar. The other hand seized Madame's

arm as it was stretched out, and twisted it sharply. She gave a shriek, and sat down on the floor. Then Nick became conscious of a stealthy intelligence in the jelly. It was feeling toward his pocket, *the* pocket. But before the groping fingers reached their goal Nick had snatched out the Browning, and pressed the muzzle against a crape-covered forehead.

There wasn't much time for looking round just then, but Nickson had done observation work in the war. The sixth of a second showed him that Captain Manners had reached this identical stage in his programme: which meant that each had a man at his mercy.

"Take your mask off," ordered Jack.

"Same to you, my beauty," echoed Nick.

The two obeyed.

"Bill Lowndes!" cried Manners.

"Know this brute, sir?" enquired Nick.

"I do!" Juliet gasped. "Oh! you horrid wretch! And Bill Lowndes! I shouldn't have dreamed——"

"They're nightmares, both of 'em," broke in Jack. "Now, Juliet, don't be scared. That's all rot about Pat being done away with. Nick and I are going to save time by making these—these *skunks*—tell us where he is. But we've a minute or so to spare. They've kept Pat safe, I bet, for the sake of the ransom they meant to get out of you. There's a third-degree stunt going on in your house. Sanders is grilling Defasquelle and Simone. It all

comes back to this building that's like the web of a black spider—the *Inner Circle*—and we'll repeat that third-degree stunt here. Who's this man you call a wretch?"

"His name's Piggott," Juliet panted. "He—was editor of a hateful paper in London—*Modern Ways*—almost as vile as the *Inner Circle*. Emmy West introduced me to him. She said he wasn't bad really—if I'd meet him he'd put nice things in his paper instead of horrors—especially about Pat. I said 'Yes' for Pat's sake—Emmy insisted so. He came to Harridge's, where I was staying, but before he or I had time to speak, Pat was shown in. He gave one look, and begged me to go out—to leave this man to him. I had never seen Pat like that—and I went. I never even heard the wretch's voice or I'd have recognized it, I think. He came here and talked to me three days ago—with this mask on. Now Bill Lowndes comes with him. I don't know yet how or why he should be mixed up——"

"I do," said Jack. "It's because they're both concerned with the *Inner Circle*, on the floor below. They've had Simone in their pay, selling them news, and as for the pearls——"

"Oh! if you'll let my husband go, I'll tell you everything!" wailed Madame Veno; stumbling up from the floor. "That's my husband, Sam Piggott. He's got nothing to do with the *Inner Circle*, except a little interest he's bought, because the owner is my

step-brother. I'm English, and Sam's Irish, and our being in this business is an accident. It was all the Duke's fault and Markoff's fault——"

"Shut your mouth," grunted the big man whom Old Nick held—a man few others could have held at all.

"Shut yours—that's more to the point!" said Nickson. Apparently he meant the pistol's point. And Piggott was silenced.

"Will you let him go if I tell you things?" repeated the woman, shuddering at Nick's gesture.

"That depends on how much you can tell," decided Jack, coolly.

"I can tell *everything*," she moaned.

"Begin by telling where the Duke is."

Both men started, but collapsed. Madame Veno choked and went on:

"He's in a room downstairs—in the basement. He's been there all the time. What happened was like this: The Duke came one night to the office—I mean of the *Inner Circle*. He'd heard the editor would be there. I may as well tell you he'd got an anonymous letter to say so. It was found in his pocket. The Duchess's maid or Mademoiselle's French pal is sure to have sent it, wanting to get the Duke out of their way. And they *did* get him out! It was the night of the first 'Whisper' about the pearls and Pavoya calling at the Phayre house. The Duke got into the place by a trick—sent word by an

office boy that he had information to give. He was let into a room divided by a partition from the one where my step-brother was—the editor. You have to say what you've got to say by telephone there. You don't see any one. But the Duke guessed who was on the other side. He put the chair on the table, and climbed up, so he could get over the partition. He'd wrenched off the receiver from the 'phone, to hit my step-brother with. When he was going for him my husband heard the row, and ran in from another room. He didn't make any noise, but came up from behind and cracked the Duke over the back of the head with a big ruler. He had a *right* to do that, because the Duke horse-whipped him publicly in London for what he'd published in *Modern Ways*, and spoiled England for us both. That's why we came to New York, and I took over the 'Madame Veno' business. I was 'Madame Ayesha' in Bond Street, and wore Egyptian dress. I told you it was an accident we were mixed up in this. It wasn't my husband's fault. He *had* to defend his brother-in-law against a cowardly attack like that!

"As for Mr. Lowndes, he hated the Duke for marrying Miss Phayre—just as Lady West (who used to send us lots of news about folks she didn't like in London and Paris) hated Miss Phayre for marrying the Duke. Mr. Lowndes is one of the 'Whisperer' lot. I mean he's one of several men

who put together the 'Whisperer' stuff that comes out under one name. He was in the office that night, and so was Markoff the Russian! Your private detective was after Markoff——”

“More about him and the others by-and-by,” Manners cut her short almost gently. “Nick, would you like the job of going down to look for the Duke?”

“I would that, sir!” Nickson answered. “I’ll give this big chap a smash the way he did ’is Grice, and put him out o’ count for while I’m way.”

“No need for that. See if he’s armed.”

Nickson “went through” his prisoner’s pockets. There was only a pocket-knife, for Piggott and Lowndes had expected to meet no one more formidable than the Duchess of Claremanagh.

Lowndes was also unarmed.

“That’s all right,” pronounced Jack. “I and a Browning can keep the pair and Madame, too, in order. No, on second thoughts take her down with you. She’ll show you the way, won’t you, Madame?”

“Needs must, when the Devil drives,” she snapped.

“Thanks for the compliment,” laughed Jack. “If any one knows the gentleman by sight, it must be you!”

“I shall go with them,” Juliet said.

“Of course!” agreed Manners.

Madame Veno turned and glared at her. “You gave us away in spite of your promise. You deserve

to see what you *will* see down there. A dead man—killed by your husband. You'll save your dear Duke only to have him sent to the chair."

Juliet gave her look for look. "I didn't give you away. I did not dream my cousin was coming here! And I'd know by your face, even if I didn't know Claremanagh, that he has killed no man. If there's a dead man where my husband is, someone else committed the murder."

"Hear, hear! your Grice!" shouted Nickson, before he could remember to be respectful.

Suddenly Juliet heard herself laughing. Then she began to sob: "Oh, Pat—Pat! Nick, take me to him!"

Nickson flung Piggott across the room, and grabbed Madame Veno by the arm.

The next thing the Duchess knew, the door had shut behind them. Jack was left alone with the two men. But Juliet had forgotten Jack.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WHOLE OF THE SECRET

MADAME VENO—alias Mrs. Sam Piggott—had a key to the door of the janitor's flat. She, her husband, and their associates could come and go as they chose when the janitor was away or upstairs.

"You won't get anything out of your husband," she said to Juliet as the three went down, she leading with mingled defiance and reluctance. "He hasn't come back to his senses yet. It wasn't so much the blow—mind you, my husband was within his rights, defending his brother-in-law from assault!—it wasn't the blow so much as the fall. The Duke fell on the back of his head. It was concussion. We had a doctor in—a friend of ours we could trust. And we weren't going to let you know till we were sure he was out of danger—ready to be moved. If he has to stand his trial for killing Markoff, why——"

"How does a man with concussion of the brain commit murder?" Juliet's question stabbed like a stiletto. By this time they were at the door of the basement flat, and Madame Veno was fumbling with a bunch of keys, Nickson's eyes upon her hands.

"Naturally the killing was done before the concussion," Madame sneered. "The Duke hated Markoff because of Pavoya. Perhaps he had reason. But that won't help him with a jury!"

Juliet could have struck the woman and trampled her under foot. She turned upon her in the dimly lit passage so fiercely that the nervous fingers jumped and let fall the key. "You fool!" the Duchess said. "You told me I should see a dead man here. Yet according to your own story my husband was struck down the night after I saw him last. One doesn't keep a dead man in a flat for weeks!"

Madame Veno drew in a sharp breath, and mumbled something which Juliet could not hear. It was easy to deduce that the story of Markoff's death by Claremanagh's hand was an impromptu effort—an inspiration which didn't quite "come off!" The woman had suddenly caught at a desperate chance. The Duke, having lost all memory of events, could be made to believe what they chose about himself. And if the Duchess and her friends could be got to credit the tale, the Markoff affair would be simplified.

He had been known to Madame's husband and step-brother for years, even before the war, when he had fed *Modern Ways* in London and the *Inner Circle* in New York with rich titbits of scandal concerning the Russian Court. He had told Piggott that Russia had a grievance against the Claremanagh family in connection with the Tsarina pearls; that this treasure

ought to be returned to the Crown; and Piggott had suspected that Markoff was "out" to get it if he could. This visit of his to New York was for some reason *sub rosa*. His passport was made out for a merchant of skins named Halbin; but he had called upon his two old acquaintances and offered for sale the most intimate personal secrets of Trotsky and Lenin. The brothers-in-law had guessed that he wanted the Tsarina pearls for himself, if they could be got, as he had once pretended to want them for the Russian Crown. So, when by amazing luck they found themselves in possession of the famous rope, their first thought was to bargain with Markoff-Halbin. He had risen to the bait, and had made an offer. It sounded satisfactory, but the money was not forthcoming. A "friend" was to produce it. Meanwhile, when it was learned through the "leak" at the Duchess's that Sanders sought Markoff, shelter was given him; also the "benefit of the doubt." But little doubt remained when he tried to steal the pearls! As for the consequences of this attempt, they were upon the man's own head! And at worst, the doctor would certify that death had not been the direct result of a blow, but of heart failure.

The end had come the day before the Duchess was invited to Madame Veno's; and had it not come, Madame de Saintville might have been left in peace till her help was wanted in some other direction. With Markoff dead, and his problematic "offer"

wiped from the slate, the best remaining hope was the Duchess. Claremanagh would not be able to testify against the man who had struck him down—would not even know that Sam Pigott had revenged himself at last for the caning episode in London. He and the pearls could be handed over to the Duchess; price, a million dollars; and no one would ever know where and how he had spent those weeks missing from his calendar.

The scheme had been in fine working order up to the moment when that middle door had suddenly opened! Madame Veno thought bitterly of the mistake they had all made in sending for the Duchess. The thing might surely have been managed in another way! But it was useless to cry over spilt milk—a million dollars' worth of spilt milk! They must be grateful if the Enemy held his tongue, and they kept out of jail.

She laughed when the Duchess called aloud, "Pat! Where are you? It's Juliet, who loves you." She was so sure that the cry would be answered by silence, for there was a dead man in one room, an unconscious man in another. But there was no laugh left in her when Claremanagh's voice rang out, clear and sane, "Hullo, my darling! Here I am!"

He had been shamming, then! How much had he heard? How much could he tell? *How much did he remember?*

Juliet flew in the direction of the beloved voice. It

was heaven to hear it after the hell she had suffered! There were two doors opposite each other. She tried the first. Locked! But the key was there. It turned, and she threw the door open only to slam it shut with a stifled gasp—for on the bed was a long shape covered with a sheet. It was the body of Markoff, of whom she had heard so much of late from Jack and Sanders, though till now—when he had ceased to live—she'd hardly believed in his existence.

Again Pat called. She realized that he was in the room opposite, and in less than a minute she was with him—in a grey room where a pale Pat lay in a squalid bed. He sat up, a strange, unkempt figure: the immaculate Claremanagh unshaven, his smooth hair rumped; a torn shirt open at the throat, instead of those smart silk pyjamas in "Futurist" colours which she'd often smiled at and admired!

She rushed into his arms. He was strong enough to clasp her tight. "Oh, my Pat, my dearest one!" she sobbed. "I have you again! Say you're not going to die. Say you still love me!"

"I adore you. And I'm not going to die. Perhaps I came near it. I don't know. But this is new life. And, Juliet—*I've got back the pearls for you!*"

"Oh—the pearls! I'd forgotten them."

"I hadn't. You see, it meant a lot to me to prove to you that it wasn't I who walked off with

them. Darling, I suppose you wouldn't be here now if you didn't know how I got to this place?"

"I know partly. I know you went at night to the *Inner Circle* office to punish that Beast. And the horrible London man, Piggott—his brother-in-law—struck you from behind——"

"Was it like that? I wasn't sure what happened, and I don't know yet where I am. But since I woke up to things, I've lain still, and listened when they thought I was nothing but a log. I wasn't strong enough to do much. I *had* to lie low! But there was a row about the pearls. Markoff was here—hiding, I think. How these people got the pearls I haven't made out. They had them, though—and Markoff tried to steal them instead of buying as he'd promised. He fell in a fit or something, and died. I heard a doctor talking—a pal of the people here. The night Markoff died they were squabbling over the pearls, a woman and two men in the next room. I heard them say where they were kept—in the room where they'd put Markoff's body till they could get rid of it. They'd no idea I'd come alive. At last, to-day when they were all out, and the coast clear—it can't have been two hours ago—I struggled up and got the pearls—beneath a loose board in the floor under the carpet. They're inside this mattress now. I was planning how to make my 'getaway' when I heard your voice. Jove! This has been a bad dream. But thank God it's

over for us both. You'll have to believe in me when I give you the pearls."

"Give me your love—your forgiveness," begged Juliet. "I want nothing else."

"You'll have to take the lot!" Pat almost laughed. "But as to forgiveness—why, darling one, there's nothing to forgive!"

Leon Defasquelle's look, when he saw Sanders instead of the Frenchwoman alone, was in itself a confession. He knew he was trapped. His dark, southern face faded to the yellow green of seasickness. Speechless, anxious-eyed as a kicked dog, he would have backed to the door, but Sanders was ready for that. He stepped between him and the hope of escape. "It's all up, my friend," the detective said, in his quiet voice. Then, remembering that Defasquelle had little English, he went on in half-forgotten school French, a little slang thrown in from novels he'd read.

"Your *chère amie* has split on you. No good getting out the pistol from your pocket. Nothing doing in that line!" (He showed his Browning.) "We can settle this business without blood if you've got common sense."

"That woman—that devil has told her side of the story!" Defasquelle raged, with a look that longed to kill. "Now you shall have mine. She was the temptress. She has ruined me."

"Liar!" shrilled Simone. "Coward and deceiver! You have a *fiancée* in Marseilles. You let me think you'd marry me!"

"You threatened to betray! I had to defend myself. You made me a thief!"

"Ah, accuse *me!*"

"Because you are guilty!"

It was thus that Sanders heard the story, bit by bit. And patching together these torn rags of recrimination he got the pattern of the whole cloth.

Simone had scraped acquaintance with her countryman. He had complained of the Duke's carelessness and lack of consideration in refusing to break the seals of the packet. Then a dazzling idea had come to Simone. The packet, Defasquelle said, had been flung into a wall-safe. Simone knew all about that safe! She knew also where the Duchess (as careless in some ways as the Duke) kept the combination jotted down on a bit of paper. Defasquelle could not be suspected (she pointed out), as he had earnestly implored the Duke to open the package in his presence. Nor was there the least danger for herself. She was completely trusted. It would be tempting Providence not to seize such an opportunity of fortune! As for "stealing," that was not the word. These pearls didn't properly belong to the Claremanaghs. They should have been returned to the Russian Crown. Now, there *was* no Russian crown. The pearls belonged to no one—

unless to those with pluck enough to take them.

According to Defasquelle, those were Simone's arguments. And he saw too late that she'd drawn him into the intrigue instead of managing it alone, drawn him in so as to hold him in her power—and get a husband at the sword's point! He, in his heart, had thought of the girl at Marseilles. The one objection to him there was his lack of money. The girl's father accused him of presenting his prospects in too rosy colours. If the pearls could be disposed of as Mademoiselle vowed they could even known as they were, over the world, the future would be ideal.

Simone had opened the safe with the aid of her mistress's memorandum, Defasquelle having gone away and come back again. To their surprise they had found, on the same shelf with the packet, a rope of great blue pearls. At first Defasquelle had taken them for the genuine ones, though the seals on the packet appeared intact. But Simone was an expert in pearls, like the Duchess. A simple test had shown that the rope was a copy. As for the clasp, neither thought of the difference in the watching eye; and it seemed to both that the "find" was almost a miracle in their favour.

The Duchess—argued Simone—was unlikely to suspect a substitution. She would not test the pearls, and might wear them for months or years without guessing that they weren't genuine. Meanwhile, Simone would leave her service, and never

need to take a place again. She would go home to France and live on her share from the sale of the pearls.

The Duke being absent, and the Duchess, too, she and Defasquelle could work safely in the study. Simone had some red sealing wax; and the Duke's famous ring lay on the desk where he'd left it after displaying the design to Mayen's messenger. Simone had thought of everything—even to a pair of rubber gloves which she used when cleaning her mistress's gold toilet things. These gloves she had put on before touching the safe, the packet, or the seal ring. And having opened the packet she had made Defasquelle smoke one of the Duke's special brand of cigarettes to scent the handkerchief wrapped round the jewel case. If worst came to worst, and suspicion were excited, let it fall upon the Duke himself, and Lyda Pavoya.

Then, that very night, suspicion *had* fallen!

The Duchess had discovered that the pearls were false. Simone had overheard snatches of talk between her and the Duke, and it had seemed well to mention Pavoya's visit in order that Lyda might be suspected from the beginning. Also, Simone had felt it safe to give the whole story to the *Inner Circle*. The Duke and Duchess had quarrelled, so why not? She would get extra pay. And soon she would be leaving the Claremanaghs forever.

One of her first thoughts in connection with the

pearls was to hint in the office at having secured a great treasure, to sell for a comparatively low price. If the invisible editor rose to the bait, as Simone hoped he might, she would be saved much trouble and danger: also she would have protection in case of trouble.

She had been right about the bait; but once she was in his power the man put on the screw, and too late Simone regretted applying to him. Defasquelle reproached her bitterly, and they quarrelled, yet he could not break free. Simone held him in chains, as both were held by the *Inner Circle*. The fortune she had visioned dwindled to a few thousand dollars which were all the *Inner Circle* men would pay for "stolen property." This was maddening, because the fortune would go to *them*. There was nothing to do, however, save consent.

It was by Defasquelle's suggestion, Simone vowed, that she'd sent an anonymous letter to the Duke, mentioning an hour when the illusive editor could be found, and at the same time warning the editor himself that violence might be expected. If the Duke were "smashed up" there would be just half the danger to face in future; and Defasquelle owed him a grudge for laughing at his first request which, if granted, would have saved him from temptation.

So there, in its patched design, the great pearl secret lay exposed! Fitted in with the forced

confessions from the side of the *Inner Circle*, and from what Claremanagh had overheard, it was complete.

What to do with the guilty ones was the next question.

Sanders being a private detective, not a member of the police, considered that his obligation was to his employers, not to the public. He was going to leave the decision to Captain Manners and the Duchess—who were paying for his services. If they and the Duke wanted to pack the lot to prison, at the price of a big scandal, well and good. If, on the contrary, the culprits were to be let off and silence kept, it was the same to him.

Later, when he learned by telephone from Manners what had happened in the *Inner Circle* building, he did not change his mind. He obeyed instructions and ordered the Duchess's car to go there at once. Fortunately night had fallen and the Duke, in any sort of toilet, could easily be smuggled home.

"Claremanagh has the pearls," 'phoned Jack. "And he'll soon be fit again—the two principal things. These blighters have got a dead man here—Markoff—but they've a doctor's certificate testifying that he died of heart failure. Arrangements have been made to bury him to-morrow. We think, on the whole, that the dead past had best bury *its* dead, too! No great crime has actually been done, as it turns out. But the scandal would be great, for a

number of innocent ones who don't deserve it. What?"

Sanders grinned quietly. He guessed *which* innocent one was most in Manners' thoughts!

"Right!" he said. "Though it seems a pity that d—d *Inner Circle* should get off scot free."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. It won't. Pat not only found the pearls, but overheard such a lot he's in a position to turn blackmailer. He's held up the rotters. They've had to sign a paper swearing to mend their ways. Lowndes is one of them; there's an Irishman—compatriot of Pat's—from a London rag, who slugged him. And the *editor*—Gee! you'd *never* guess who *he's* turned out to be."

"But I know!" said the detective.

"Well, anyhow, he's going to transform the *Inner Circle* into a sort of *Inner Shrine*, if he keeps his promise. Lord! Won't the next number be a sensation?"

"Yes—make up to the public a bit for losing the truth about the great pearl secret."

Jack laughed joyfully—his first happy laugh for weeks. And then, even from that unblest place, the flat of Madame Veno, he could not omit calling up Lyda, at her house.

She was at home, and answered: "Oh, I'm thankful to hear your voice. Is all well with the Duchess?"

"Yes, also with the Duke."

"He's found?"

"Yes. *And* the pearls. So all's well with everyone except me."

"Why not with you?"

"How can it be till you give me that promise?"

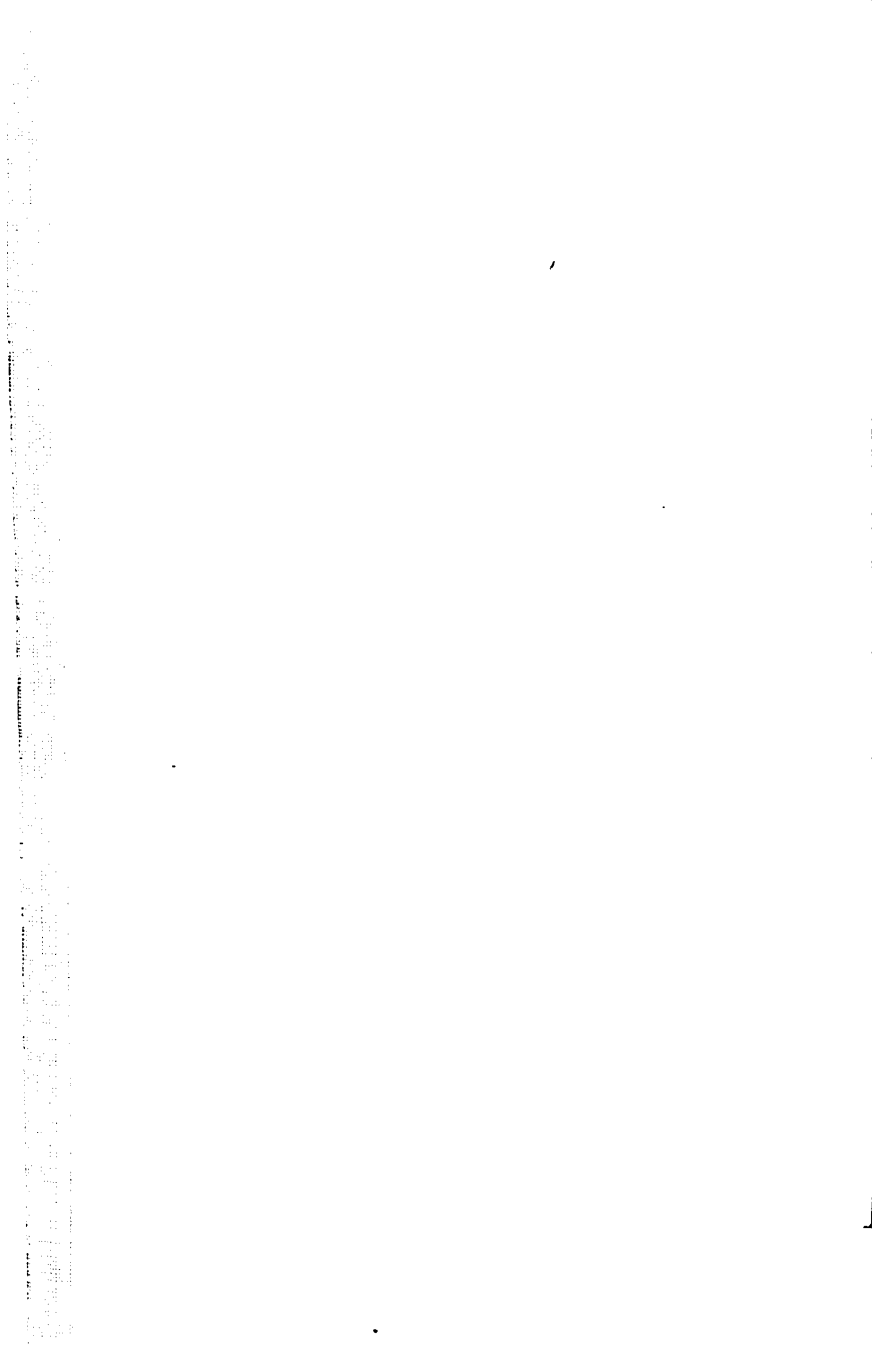
"But—since these things have happened, it's yours already. And—so am I. You are *the* man. I am *the* woman!"

"My goddess!" cried Jack through the uncongenial telephone. "I'm coming to you the instant I'm free. Juliet and Pat send you their love. You've got all mine already."

THE END









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